

HAZURE SKILL

THE GUILD MEMBER WITH
A WORTHLESS SKILL IS ACTUALLY
A LEGENDARY ASSASSIN

Kennoji

ILLUSTRATION BY
KWKM

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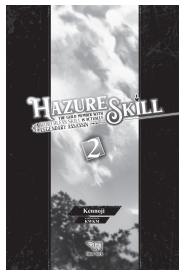






"One final bit of advice before
you die. Some things in this
world are better left unknown."

That guy has
no sense of self-
preservation.



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Hazure Skill: The Guild Member with a Worthless Skill Is Actually a Legendary Assassin, Vol. 2

Kennoji

Translation by Jan Mitsuko Cash

Cover art by KWKM

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HAZURE SKILL “KAGE GA USUI” WO MOTSU GUILD SHOKUIN GA, JITSU WA DENSETSU NO ANSATSUSHA Vol. 2

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Prologue

I awoke to the morning light streaming in from the window, then I slipped out of bed, leaving the still slumbering Rila behind.

Her true name was Rileyla Diakitep. Until only recently, she'd led an entire army and had been touted as the most powerful, terrifying demon lord of all time as she dragged the world into war.

Well, I suppose I ought to call her the *ex*-demon lord, all things considered.

"...Already awake...?" Rila turned her drowsy eyes to me as she cradled the blankets against herself. "For an assassin, you have adjusted well to mornings."

"That's *former* assassin. I've quit."

"I guess that's true."

My last mission in my many years as a covert killer had been to eliminate the demon lord. The client had been the Felind Kingdom's ruler, King Randolph. He'd also requested that I assist the party of heroes. The group had been composed of four women, Almelia the hero, Elvie the paladin, Lina the mage, and Serafin the cleric. After fighting in the great Human-Fiend War, we had infiltrated the demon lord's castle.

None of us had suffered any serious injuries, but the party of heroes was left exhausted by the time we entered the stronghold. So, as the only one who wasn't worn out, I'd decided to challenge the demon lord on my own.

"It's barely dawn... You would do well to rest a little longer," Rila said as she made room for me to come back to bed.

A calm expression graced Rila's face—something that would have been unimaginable during our first encounter.

My final job had gone extraordinarily well.

Rila was here because I'd sealed her powers using a collar I put around her neck. In addition to transforming her, the unique, unremovable accessory I had acquired specifically for the demon lord weakened the wearer the more mana they possessed. That was how I'd "killed" her.

The only people who knew about this secret were Rila and I, along with the elf Roje, who'd served as Rila's guard in the disbanded army.

“Somewhere along the way, you got defenseless. I can see weakness all over your face,” I stated.

“I could say the same to you,” Rila snickered.

She was a beautiful demon woman who boasted magical abilities that far surpassed anyone else’s, in addition to her excellent sensibilities. She was so mighty, even an entire kingdom wouldn’t have been enough to defeat her at the height of her power.

Quickly now, Rila urged me as she patted the empty spot on the mattress. Begrudgingly, I lay back down in bed.

“Back then, I truly thought you were the grim reaper,” Rila admitted suddenly.

“You mean in your audience chamber?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm.”

“I’d fooled myself into thinking I could go toe to toe with you, but that couldn’t have been further from the truth.”

I’d gotten Rila to admit defeat in less than ten minutes. She hadn’t been able to strike me a single time, so I suppose I could claim it had been a landslide victory.

“Each of you humans has a special power that you call a skill, do you not?”

“Yes. But some skills are winners, and others are losers.”

Society considered my Unobtrusive skill to be one of those worthless ones. The most my skill could do was make me less noticeable to others. It didn’t render me invisible or conceal all traces of my presence. I merely became considerably unremarkable. Despite the demon lord being an impossible opponent, even for a king’s army, I’d single-handedly bested her in hardly any time at all.

“Even if I had understood your skill, I never could have won against the way you used it,” Rila remarked.

“Of course. In my line of work, it’s all about the finishing blow. If I couldn’t kill a mark just because they unraveled the workings of my skill, I’d be a poor assassin.”

My skill was a dud. The kind most people didn’t even bother using.

During my battle with Rila, she hadn’t been able to sense that I was right in front of her eyes, which had quickly confused her right from the start of the fight. She might have come up with a plan to counter me, but by the time she could act on it, I’d already thrust a knife in front of her eyes.

From there, Rila, now able to transform into a black cat, and I began a *normal* life together. When the king had asked me what I wanted as a reward, that was what I had requested.

Some time passed after I returned to bed, but I got up again before long. Rila followed me. She made a simple breakfast in the kitchen,

which I ate before heading to work.

Though we were supposed to be living a *normal life*, I didn't have a fantastic grip on what most people considered average.

After thinking it over, I'd concluded that most people had day jobs. Coincidentally, the local Adventurers Guild was looking for employees, so I'd interviewed there and was hired.

From my home, I made my way into town, where that very guild office was located. After entering through the building's back entrance, I walked over to a cluster of desks behind the reception counter.

"Good morning," I greeted several coworkers who were already there.

One of the female guild employees gave me a glowing smile. "Good morning, Mr. Roland. Let's put in another good day of work!"

That was Milia, one of my work seniors and the person who often guided me through my job.

"Yes, I'm looking forward to it," I responded.

It was thanks to Milia that I'd been able to get used to this job quickly, despite the many bewildering differences I'd encountered compared with my previous occupation.

Once all the guild employees were gathered, the branch manager, Iris, came out from the back. She quickly filled us in on some matters, administered a few warnings, and then wrapped up the morning meeting.

I opened the front door and beckoned the waiting adventurers inside. It was just another regular day in my life as a guild employee.

I wasn't working at the front window today, so I was filing papers at my own desk.

"Um, I'd like to request Mr. Argan," someone said, prompting me to look over at reception. I saw an adventurer I often arranged quests for.

"Roland, since the adventurer asked specifically for you, could you fill in for me?" a coworker inquired.

"Sure."

I took the seat of the employee who'd been on front-desk duty. As I always did, I advised the adventurer using my knowledge of monsters, combat, and skills I'd cultivated during the war.

"You're always a huge help. Thanks to you, Mr. Argan, I've pretty much stopped injuring myself. It almost feels like I'm getting better."

"Probably because you are. Self-confidence that stops shy of cockiness is what people call true strength. You have nothing but your own abilities to thank for your recent success."

"Thank you. I'm looking forward to working with you in the

future.” The adventurer bowed and left.

“Every client looks up to you so much,” Milia said.

“You think so?”

I only knew how adventurers acted around me, so I didn’t have anything else to compare their behavior to.

“Mr. Rolaaand! We’ve got an aspiring adventurer. Could you please help them?” came another call.

“Of course.”

To become an adventurer, one had to undertake a test, and I had recently been made proctor for this office. The word was that those who passed my tests went on to serve in remote regions.

As it happened, the person who wanted to take the test today, passed.

“Looks like you’re getting along well...,” branch manager Iris murmured to herself when I came back to give her a report. She looked over the paperwork, then me.

“Do you think so?” I questioned.

“I do. It feels like such a long time since the day I interviewed you.”

“Yes, it does feel like a lot of time has passed since I used my skill to pull off your underwear and put them back on.”

“You don’t have to say that part out loud!” Iris cried, blushing. After clearing her throat, she continued. “The regulars rely on you, and every adventurer you’ve passed on the exam has continued to remain active... Does this work feel rewarding?”

“Rewarding?” I repeated blankly.

Iris nodded.

Truthfully, it did feel nice to hear about the successes of those who’d passed my exam and took quests I’d recommended. Some adventurers had even gone out of their way to thank me.

“I feel like it actually might be,” I answered.

“I’m expecting great things from you, so keep up the good work,” Iris instructed with a smile.

Here, I didn’t have to kill or trick anyone. Working as a guild employee was a *normal* job. The only concerns I had were how to continue this average existence I had found.

At the time, I hadn’t had the faintest idea I’d soon be dragged into the arranged marriage of Almelia the hero, a former pupil of mine who just happened to be the kingdom’s princess.

1

Quest Rank Assignment Work

Between tasks, I decided to ask Milia about a feeling I'd had earlier. It'd felt warm.

"Are you talking about your friend?"

"Yes."

I filled Milia in about what had happened between Rila and me recently, but played it off like I was asking for an acquaintance. Rila's own nauseating cooking had mistakenly led her to believe she was pregnant. Her eyes had glistened with tears as she told me she would've been happy if she really had been carrying our child.

Seeing her like that had given me an odd sensation I could only describe as warm and fuzzy.

After hearing me say as much, Milia nodded and hummed to herself.

"So your friend was told by someone—his lover—that she would have been happy if they had kids together. Is that right?"

"Yes, apparently, he felt very odd upon hearing that. He was overcome with an impulse to hug her, or so he told me..."

"Then that's what it is!" Milia whipped her pointer finger up. "He was joyous because he feels affection for her! I'm sure of it!"

Evidently, that was it, then.

"What a happy couple. That's so sweet," Milia mused.

Joy and affection...I see. Was that what I'd felt?

I looked through the stack of requests on the desk. The pile of documents comprised reception stubs clients would submit in consultation with us before taking quests.

"We can't fulfill every single one, of course," Milia remarked while checking the slips with me. "Some of them are incredibly specific, and others don't even qualify as quests."

That's why we had to sort through them.

Once we determined which were valid, we would check with Iris. If she approved the decision, we would ask the client for information on the job and scope out the area. After all that, we would determine the reward.

The payment had to be something the adventurers who took the

quest would find beneficial, so it didn't strictly need to be money. Based on the reward, we'd set a rank for the job.

Only after all this would Iris give final approval as the branch manager; with that, the quest finally became available for people to undertake.

"Oh, this might be a good one."

Milia showed me the piece of paper. To summarize, the request was *Someone's roughing up my orchard, and I have no idea what to do.*

"Quests that might lead to combat like this one seem right up your alley, Mr. Roland," Milia said.

"They really are," I agreed.

"I'm much better at dealing with jobs for everyday living, so can I leave this one up to you?"

"Sure. I'll ask the branch manager to approve it."

I headed to Iris's office, and after she looked at the reception stub, she quickly okayed it.

"Looks like a citrus orchard that cultivates ounats fruit. Okay, off you go—get a second statement from them and check out the scene."

After slapping a stamp of approval on the stub, she returned it to me.

Then I left the Adventurers Guild empty-handed. Two steeds were reserved for guild use at the horse rental, so I took one and headed out of town.

Since Rila had been hanging around the guild in her black-cat form today, she accompanied me.

"Ounats? Ah yes, the yellow fruit that is sweet and sour," she recalled. As a cat, she clung to my shoulder, her eyes glittering.

"You've seen them a lot in the market, haven't you?" I asked.

"Oh, what savages these ruffians must be! How could they lay a field of those fruits to waste!"

The great demon lord herself seemed indignant at the thought.

"The culprits could be humans. Consulting with the one who submitted the request seems like a good place to start."

"I shall mete out a befitting punishment!"

The adventurers really ought to be the ones dispensing justice.

Luckily, the client's house wasn't too far off.



After riding for around a half hour, Rila and I spotted a large orchard. A tall fence surrounded it—one that humans would have difficulty scaling—and there were many trees within it.

"Oh yes, there are indeed ounats here." As her nose twitched,

Rila's tongue flicked out to lick her lips.

Next to the orchard was a shed. The contractee would either be in there or at the house.

I dismounted and tied the horse to the fence.

"To think they would steal ounats...! Unforgivable..."

Rila brandished her little claws, poised for attack.

I tried the shed, but no one was there.

"There must be a domicile nearby. Knave, quickly now! We must make haste!"

Urged on by Rila, who was full of vigor to get the job done, I quickly hurried to the house.

"The client cultivates and sells ounats for a living. I don't think I could forgive anyone who'd get in the way of another's livelihood, either," I stated.

Doing so meant denying them their *normal life*.

On the way, we encountered several primates. Giant baboons, to be exact. However, I made short work of them. In no time at all, they were lumps of carrion. Since it all had happened in an instant, I couldn't even remember how many of the beasts there'd been initially.

"Really now, who would commit such an offense... They must have picked the ounats in secret and taken them somewhere to sell. I just know it."

"That does seem like a possibility."

Another giant baboon stood in my way, so I killed it swiftly.

"I am quite partial to ounats pie," Rila admitted.

"If I remember right, they often sell those at the market."

Whenever I went shopping with Rila, she would constantly pester me to buy one for her.

"But if the town can no longer obtain the fruit from this orchard, then I will be denied those confections...", Rila concluded, immediately deflating. Even her ears slumped as she hung her head. "The price of ounats will rise. Pies that use them will become scarce, to say nothing of other foods that use them. Truly it is a great shame."

It seemed that the culprit would be getting their just desserts if Rila got her paws on them.

Again, I happened upon a baboon and was forced to slay it. Fortunately, it appeared to be the last one. I didn't sense the presence of any other unusual creatures.

We found the old house that stood all on its lonesome. I knocked on its door.

"Excuse me. I'm Roland Argan, one of the employees of the Lahti branch Adventurers Guild," I said by way of introduction.

There was a brief commotion from within. After which, the door

opened.

“Oh, you’re from the guild, you say?” A good-natured middle-aged man stood at the entrance. He was the client, Hogan.

“I’ve come to inquire about the situation formally and to investigate the location,” I explained.

“Have you now? Please come right in. Over this way.” He led us to a dining area that connected to the kitchen.

Hogan lived with his wife. According to him, they spent their days working in the orchard, and they lived on the income it generated.

“These culprits grow more irredeemable by the moment,” I muttered.

They were stealing this couple’s peaceful livelihood.

“Even if we can find the responsible party...we have no idea how we’d confront someone so dangerous...,” Hogan told me.

“You don’t need to worry. That will be the adventurers’ work. If you were injured, you might be left unable to farm.”

“You’re quite right.” Hogan let out a long sigh.

“Can your kitty eat citrus?” Hogan’s wife questioned. She had brought sliced ounats over.

“Yes, she loves them.”

Meow. ♪

“Oh my. I’m glad.”

Rila sat obediently as the woman placed a plate of thinly sliced fruit down for her. The ex-demon lord wasted no time gobbling them up.

While Rila looked like a cat, her body’s actual nature was still that of a demon in some respects.

“Do you have any idea who the culprit could be? For example, have you heard of robbers being in the vicinity or anything like that?” I asked.

“There’s been no word of thieves. We’re easy targets, but we’ve got a tall fence. Nobody’s broken the lock, and we’ve never even found traces of an attempted break-in,” Hogan replied.

“I see.”

“We have spotted footprints, though. Many times, in fact.” As though recalling them, Hogan’s eyes wandered away. “They were about yay big. Anyway, the impressions looked to belong to a large person. And there were tons of them.”

With his hands, Hogan indicated the size.

“That’s nearly a foot in length, then. Was there anything else?” I urged.

The culprit must have been a man large enough to climb the fence easily.

“We did see something that looked like drool on the ground. It

was also on the trees.”

“Drool, you say?”

If the offender were human, their drool likely would have dried up and disappeared in moments. Based on the size of the feet, it was probably an adult. What kind of fully grown person salivated like that?

“...”

“Um, sir, how large would the payment be?” Hogan inquired.

“Huh? Oh, um, the reward and commission would depend on the rank...”

I pulled a paper I’d brought with me from my pocket. It detailed remuneration for quests, depending on if they were rank F, rank E, and so on.

The higher the level, the more skilled the adventurers would have to be to accept the job. Unsurprisingly, more capable workers meant a greater fee.

I explained that to Hogan, along with how rank was determined. “Since it’s a quest to drive out either a monster or a person, this is likely a rank-D quest. If you would like to include setting up countermeasures against the intruders, that would raise it to rank C.”

“Rank C...and what would the commission and reward fee look like?” Hogan asked, furrowing his brow in thought.

Undoubtedly, he was worried about the price of this whole thing.

“I can hardly believe it, but... Knave,” Rila called to me.

“Hmm?”

Rila glanced outside. I followed her gaze to where the giant baboon corpses were strewn about. There were too many to count.

Giant baboons were smaller than adult humans, but their feet were large and long. They were also stronger than most people. So long as they could find a grip on the fence, climbing it would be easy for them.

“...”

I might have already solved the problem.

I informed Hogan that I had beat the monsters off on the way, and I believed they were the culprits.

“What?! Then...do you mean our ounats won’t be stolen anymore and our orchard is safe?”

“Only if the giant baboons truly were the culprits,” I said, but it was very likely they had been.

“I’ve seen those things from afar once before,” Hogan’s wife interjected.

“Have you really?” I asked.

The woman nodded. “I thought they were highwaymen or some such and hid, but I did get a glimpse of them.”

“What did they look like?”

“I believe...they had tawny skin that looked a bit like a coat.”

That likely hadn't been either their skin or a coat; it was fur.

“They were so nimble that they scaled our tall fence with their bare hands.”

A human could only accomplish such a feat if they possessed special abilities. It really must have been the giant baboons. Just to be sure, I had the couple come outside and showed them the monsters.

“They attacked me on the way here, but I took care of them.”

Hogan and his spouse seemed impressed.

“They do look a bit like the ruffians I spotted,” said Hogan's wife.

“I see, I see! So you've already taken care of the issue for us!” Hogan exclaimed. He took my hand and gave it a thorough shake. I felt a bit sorry to inform him that one issue remained unsolved.

“Giant baboons have a strong sense of solidarity with their peers, so they often mimic each other. If there are any others nearby, we can assume they'll be on their way here before long.”

“I see...,” Rila whispered. I glanced at her. She seemed troubled.

“Giant baboons normally live in the forest, but there isn't one near here,” I said to her.

“Is there a chance they were migrating and stopped here on the way?” she asked.

“If that were the case, they likely wouldn't have attacked the orchard more than once.”

There weren't any woods nearby, just grassy plains.

“So what will you do? It's not your job to do anything more, is it, knave?”

“I've already done too much to quit now. I'll see this through to the end.”

I explained to the Hogans that I'd exterminated all the giant baboons in the vicinity and more likely wouldn't come for a while.

“Is that right? What a relief.”

“However, we don't know *why* the monsters have wandered out this far. So, I'll go to the woods nearby to check on them. If we can't discern the reason behind why it happened, history will repeat itself.”

“So put together for one so young,” Hogan's wife remarked.

“Not at all. I've still got a lot to learn.”

I looked at how high the sun was in the sky. Reinterviewing the client and scoping out the location usually didn't take too long. It seemed I'd have a lot of explaining to do for Iris once I returned.

I mounted the horse I'd left tied to the fence and took off toward the nearest forest, a likely candidate for the baboons' habitat.

“The monsters might be dealing with a food shortage,” I posed to

Rila, who was sitting on my head.

"Mm-hmm. It's not all too uncommon for monsters and beasts alike. I find it doubtful they made their way from the woods simply because they took a liking to ounats."

Giant baboons primarily ate wild tree fruits and nuts.

"Guess they ran out of their usual meals," I said.

"We should see for ourselves before making assumptions," Rila replied.

I slowed the horse to a walk as we approached the forest, and surveyed our surroundings.

"I see giant baboon droppings. Looks like this is where they live," I stated.

When I inspected the tips of the branches closely, I found no nuts. The same seemed to be true of the fruit.

"...I guess it truly was because they were starving," I concluded.

"It would appear so. However, the real issue is the cause of the shortage. Unless you know that, you cannot resolve the situation," Rila said.

"I know."

I spotted several giant baboons a short way off. They were thinner than the ones I was familiar with. The same had been true for those I'd killed around the orchard.

Suddenly, a shrill cry resounded from somewhere deeper in the woods.

"KREEEEEEEEEEEE!"

"Hmm? That call sounds like..." I began.

"You recognize it?" asked Rila.

"Yes. It must be a plesiorus."

"A plesiorus? A real one? Here?"

They were massive creatures with incredibly long necks that inhabited areas near lakes and streams.

The giant baboons beat a hasty retreat, fleeing from the sound.

"A plesiorus could kill a giant baboon in a single bite. And to make matters worse, they're omnivores," I explained.

"I see. So the plesiorus has been eating their food—and them as well," Rila deduced.

Whether in the water or grazing from trees with its long neck, a plesiorus had access to plenty of food sources.

I spurred the horse to gallop and immediately spotted the monster. Its head was so high up that I had to crane my neck to look at it. When it opened its gigantic maw, it swallowed a heedless giant baboon right in the middle of enjoying a meal.

It seemed the plesiorus had wandered here from somewhere else, then made this place its home after finding an abundance of food.

My steed grew frightened and refused to move in any closer, so I dismounted and approached the plesiorus on foot.

"Rila, I don't mind if you stick with me, but you might be thrown off."

"Oh tut-tut, this is a perfect opportunity to exhibit my demon lord talents. Observe."

Putting on airs, Rila leaped off me and trotted over to the monster.

"Myaaaaaa," she called to it, which brought the plesiorus over.

"Kwureeeeeeeee."

"Meow, myaaa."

"Kwuree, kreeee."

"Meow, miaw, myaaa!"

I had no idea what they were saying to each other.

"Return me to my original form," Rila commanded. I did, but it didn't seem to make much of a difference. Her expression was indignant and huffy.

"It appears that lunk intends to make this place its home. It has no want for food and no fear of foes."

I suppose a slaying quest was on the horizon.

"Although I informed it that it had created a great deal of trouble for the giant baboons, it remained unconcerned. Also...when I told it I was the demon lord...it had the nerve to laugh! Knave, I leave the rest to you."

"Uh-huh, yes, awe-inspiring 'skills' you've exhibited," I said dryly.

"You fool. This was the result of my diplomatic efforts. I have no way of battling that thing. That would require a show of force."

"So basically, I have to do everything."

"Grrr...!" Fed up, Rila sulked as she stomped back to the horse. "Do make an attempt. This is for the ounats, after all! Justice is on our side!"

"I know. I know," I responded, waving my hand dismissively without looking back.

During the war, I'd fought many units with plesioruses.

Whether on land or sea, the things were fast. One of their merits was the ability to ferry a unit of forty on their backs. Plesioruses' long necks granted them a wide range of sight, too. It made them incredibly handy as lookouts during marches.

"KreeeeEEEE!" the monster cried out in warning when I drew near.

Despite being monsters, plesioruses had no unique form of attack.

This one turned right around on the spot and mowed down adjacent trees as it tried to swipe at me with its tail.

"You shouldn't be so hasty."

I caught the appendage with one hand and threw it back from whence it came. The plesiorus spun around and suddenly found itself facing me again. It didn't seem to understand what had happened.

"I'm sure getting along with other species is difficult, but you must share your food. If only you had, you could've lived."

"KreeeeEEEE!" The monster opened its gullet wide and roared.

I'd have a problem on my hands if it got any more violent. I invoked my skill—Unobtrusive—and dealt the finishing blow. The plesiorus tried to slam me with its neck, but missed entirely. Frustrated, it searched for me, eyes darting every which way.

Seizing upon that opening, I stuck the monster through the throat with one of the large felled trees.

"KREeeeeeeeeEEEE?!"

The plesiorus shook its head and writhed in pain.

I had a small fruit knife that the farmer's wife had given me, which had been used to cut up the ounats for Rila. I ran along the top of the tree, holding the knife in a backhanded grip, and plunged it into the monster's head.

"Kree..."

That granted the creature immediate peace.

THUMP! The expired plesiorus fell to its side.

I let out a held breath and looked to Rila. She was standing next to the horse with her arms crossed.

"Is it dead?" She seemed vaguely remorseful, and I was struck by the notion that this monster may have once been part of her legion. "It caused more than enough trouble..." she appended.

"Were you acquaintances?" I inquired.

"Hmm...well, more or less."

I had no idea what had happened to the demon lord's army after Rila had seemingly died. Supposedly, they'd retreated to Hell. Not too long ago, we encountered a splinter group that had recruited like-minded renegades, however. So, Rila's subordinates might still be wandering around. Some had failed to withdraw and made themselves at home here, intruding on the lives of others.

"I've made a decision," Rila declared.

"What's that?"

"I shall return my lingering subordinates to Hell. I know not whether they will believe I am the genuine article, given my current mana-less state...especially considering they are monsters. However, if they continue to fight under the mistaken assumption that the war is still on, then I believe it is my duty as the demon lord to put them down."

Rila had a strong sense of responsibility when it came to those who served her. As I thought about it, I realized that had always been

the case.

"If it comes to that, then I'll help you. I feel like it's my mission to protect your right to a regular life," I said.

Rila grinned at that. "Thank you. That will be of great help."

Killing the plesiorus hadn't magically brought all the missing food back. The giant baboons could attack the orchard again, rendering this whole effort a moot point.

I skinned the plesiorus and headed back to Hogan's house with Rila.



Back at the orchard, I explained the situation in the forest.

"I see... So the giant baboons came here to eat ounats after their own food source in the forest disappeared."

"Yes. And it will take a while for it to grow back. So this is a preventative measure." I pointed at the plesiorus hide outside.

"What in the world is that...?"

"It's the skin of the monster I spoke of earlier. Since the plesiorus is an enormous monster, no other monsters or beasts would dare face it directly. So, if you put that around the fencing, it should scare anything else off."

Hogan was worried the smell would transfer to the ounats, but the plesiorus was an aquatic creature that didn't have an entirely meat-based diet.

It hadn't smelled too awful, even when I'd skinned it.

I took Hogan outside and showed him.

"Ah, this seems like it will be fine."

"I think that the giant baboons will stop coming once the fruit and nuts in the forest replenish. Until then, please leave this out somewhere close, just in case. I know it will be some trouble, but if they continue to damage your orchard, please file another request at the guild."

"Thank you, thank you. We owe you quite a debt, sir!" Hogan squeezed my hand again and gave it a thorough shake.

"Not at all. We still don't know if this will work. Your gratitude is a little premature," I replied.

"That's not true. I'd heard that when guild employees come to talk and investigate a location, they leave within half an hour, but you've proven that wrong."

Going by the book, Hogan's approximation was the extent of my responsibility. Iris and Milia were probably worrying that something had happened to me.

After bidding farewell to Hogan and his wife, I mounted the horse and departed. Rila, who laced her arms around me from behind, said, "These aren't all that common, even in Hell."

"Hmm? And what about that?" I questioned.

"It's nothing," Rila chuckled from behind me.

I dropped her off at the house, returned my horse, and headed back to the guild.



Milia, who caught sight of me first, waved energetically.

"Mr. Roland, welcome back! You were so late. Did you run into any trouble?"

"Yes, a slight amount."

Since Milia had handed off the job to me, I reported the entire story to her.

"A—a—a p-p-plesiorus?! Really? Did you kill it?"

"Yes, I'd had no choice."

"Mr. Roland, that's an S-rank pile of raw materials any adventurer would be drooling over! Plesioruses are really strong!"

"The carcass is still in the woods, so we can put out a note for anyone interested in harvesting parts," I responded nonchalantly.

Milia made quite the fuss as she slapped her hand down on her desk. "Please, try to act a little more shocked! How can you behave like this sort of thing happens every day?! You're making it seem like I'm overreacting!"

To me, it actually *did* seem like she was making a big fuss over nothing. As we talked, a commotion began to build in the hall.

"There's a plesiorus...dead in that forest?"

"Wait a sec...!"

"Right...!"

"If I just had its bones and claws, I could make some slick armor!"

Those adventurers who'd heard Milia's shouting all dashed off as one group. They were so hungry for the S-rank materials and had gone into action so quickly that the guild employees who had been arranging quests for them were left in wide-eyed shock.

The bustling establishment was now empty. Iris's voice broke the silence, calling for me to come see her in her office.

"I heard that, Roland! Come and report to me?"

"Oh dear, oh dear." Milia started to panic. She whispered to me, "Mr. Roland, that's her angry voice... Do you understand? You need to start things off by giving her a heartfelt apology! If you're honest about what you did wrong, the lecture will be shorter. The more

excuses you try making, the worse it'll be. I can guarantee that!"

Evidently, Milia had gotten into trouble more than once. Armed with her warning, I went to see Iris.

Iris slowly crossed her arms and furrowed her brow, looking irked.

"Took your time, did you? All you were supposed to do was ask them questions again and scope out the location, right? And as far as I'm aware, you didn't have a far way to go. Why'd it take so long?"

Just as Milia, my acting coach, had told me, I offered a sincere apology.

"I'm sorry. I didn't go by the book and ended up doing a little more than necessary..."

Iris whipped her head up. "What?! Um, no, well, it's fine... It's not like you need to apologize..."

"That may be so, but you did seem upset based on your tone."

The woman grew flustered, and the scowl on her face stiffened. "Ahem. First, could you start by telling me what happened?" She motioned for me to sit on the sofa, then took a seat across from me.

Iris was trying to be considerate of my side of things, it seemed. She poured me some tea.

"I was sure I had some snacks to serve with tea somewhere...", she muttered.

"You know, this hospitality makes things harder, so please treat me like you normally do," I stated.

"...I suppose you're right."

After Iris cleared her throat, she crossed her legs. She was wearing tights. While the woman was indeed back to conducting herself as usual, her underwear happened to be visible.

Since telling her that would interrupt the conversation again, I averted my eyes and recounted the same report I'd given Milia.

"Hmm. So...what did you do to the plessus?"

"That's 'plesiorus.'"

"Ah right, the ples...orus. So you defeated it, and that's why all the adventurers left?"

"Yes. The reason Hogan and his wife filed a request with the guild was because of a plesiorus. I'm sorry."

Iris pressed her hand to her cheek as though she had no idea what to do. Just as my coach Milia had informed me, apologizing early and often was incredibly effective.

"I realize that the Adventurers Guild isn't a charity and that we receive a handling fee from the clients as part of our business, so taking care of things on my own might have been slightly imprudent," I admitted

After I reflected on my actions slightly, I lowered my head a tad. It really didn't matter to me, but I caught a glimpse of Iris's underwear

again.

“It’s all right,” she said.

“It...is?”

“Yes. That you help those in need is commendable, and I’ll be the first to acknowledge that you can solve problems in the blink of an eye, too. Your countermeasures were perfect as well. If this *had* been a quest, I doubt it would have gone this smoothly. I couldn’t have asked anything more.”

Iris couldn’t look me in the eye without praising me.

She continued. “Trust between clients and the Adventurers Guild is crucial. You acted with consideration for the contractees, which was the right call, I think. Without those who rely on us, our office wouldn’t exist. The entire Adventurers Guild is built on the faith of our clients. If they think we’re a reputable establishment, then we receive more work.”

Iris’s praise was accompanied by a profoundly compassionate smile. Yet again, I caught a glimpse of her underwear.

“I also like ounats...so I think it’s wonderful that you settled this as soon as possible. That is just my opinion, though.”

I’d survived a meeting with my boss, and I owed it all to Milia.

“Maybe we’ll have a more experienced guild employee go with you next time,” Iris said. With that, she dismissed me.

“Um, Branch Manager,” I stated before leaving the office.

“Was there something else?”

“Your underwear was in plain view during that entire conversation.”

“Pyah!” Iris cried in a strange voice as she pushed down the hem of her skirt. “F-for how long?”

“As I said, it was the whole time. I thought you might have been doing it on purpose.”

“I wasn’t! If I had, I would’ve worn something nicer... What are you even making me say?!”

“Well, I’ll be returning to my work. Excuse me.”

“W-w-wait a second!”

The door to the branch manager’s office clunked as it closed behind me.



After that, Iris wore pants instead of skirts for a few days. Hogan also stopped by with a box filled with ounats.

“Since you were so helpful, I’ve brought this as a token of gratitude. I hope that you and your coworkers enjoy them.”

“Thank you. We’ll gladly accept these.”

I handed each employee two of the fruits. Since Iris had specifically mentioned liking them, I gave her three.

“...Wh-what’re these for? I’m not cheap enough to buy off with these. This isn’t going to make up for what you did... Huh? Did you give me more than the others? H-hmph. Th-thank you...”

Evidently, she was still upset about the whole underwear thing, but her mood was improving.

I decided to bring home the rest of the ounats and give them to Rila. She’d also mentioned that she enjoyed them.

“Ha-ha-ha, it seems you understand well, knave,” she declared, looking smug.



She wasted no time biting into one, but then immediately grimaced.

“Ghk.”

It must have been sour.



A few days passed.

“Ah, well,” Maurey said as he grinned gleefully and quickly walked around. “Watch and learn. Got that, rookie?”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to learning through observing you.”

I bobbed my head slightly. About an hour ago, Iris had told me to go with Maurey to determine the quest rank for a job. After the recent trouble with the plesiorus, she thought it was prudent for me to learn from him. Maurey was supposedly a veteran with this kind of work.

“C’m on, guess I’ve got no choice but to babysit you,” Maurey half groaned. I could feel the superiority wafting right off him.

However, a certain someone was trying to put a stop to it.

“Branch managerrrrrr! Me! Let *me* go with Mr. Roland today. I’m doing the same job as him, so instead of Maurey—”

“You can’t, Milia,” Iris replied.

“Why not?!”

“Well, because...I know exactly what you’re really after.”

“Yeek?! I-it’s not like...that’s what I was thinking... I was just hoping to be in charge of teaching Roland. That’s all. I don’t have any ulterior motives.”

“You sound more and more suspect by the second to me. Regardless, I’m having him go with Maurey today.”

“...Branch Manager...are you sure you’re not just trying to prevent me from getting better acquainted with Mr. Roland?”

“Excuse me. I heard that. I don’t mix work with my private life, just so you know. Look, I’ll ask you to do it next time, but today Maurey is doing it.”

“Kay. Then I’ll teach the rookie how to do what we call *real work*!” Maurey stated, looking entirely serious so he could show off to Iris and Milia. “Figuring out ranks for quests is a piece of cake. You just listen to what they have to say and make sure everything checks out on the info slip. Then you take a look with your own peepers to see what the quest is gonna be like. Just go by the manual, talk about the fee with the client, decide the rank. Okay?”

“Sure.”

“You’re supposed to respond ‘okay’!”

In an unusually good mood, Maurey gave my shoulders a hearty

pat.

This time the client was in town, so we traveled on foot. Our destination was a secondhand shop. I'd gone several times before, but the establishment dealt more with everyday items like kitchen knives, shovels, and hoes than with swords or spears. We were to meet with the shopkeeper. He wanted a new whetstone to replace a broken one.

"Oh, c'mon, that lug couldn't take care of that himself? People rely on adventurers for everything nowadays. I see it all the time. Oh well, we'll say this is a rank F and just get the conversation over with."

"Yes, you're right," I replied offhandedly.

The store came into view, and we headed inside.

"How's it going? Hey there, old-timer," Maurey greeted.

The bearded shopkeeper on the other side of the counter answered back, "Yuh-huh... Is that you, Maurey? So, you're the staffer in charge of the quest this time, eh?"

"Yeah, well, something like that." Maurey jerked a thumb in my direction. "This guy tagged along to observe me on the job. He's a newbie. Treat him nice for me, will ya?"

"Nice to meet you. I'm Roland Argan."

"Yes, I've seen him in town several times. You were with that redhead, right? That real pretty gal."

"That's right."

It seemed that Maurey had realized who she was. He scowled. "... Hey, kid. What is she to you? Depending on how you answer, you might not be going home in one piece... Is she your girl?"

My girl? I didn't know whether he meant girlfriend or something else, but I didn't think either was right.

"No, you're mistaken."

"Oh, c'mon, why didn't you say so sooner?"

Maurey clapped me on the back again and wrapped his arm around my shoulders.

"You don't really make much of an impression on people or seem like you'd be all that popular with the ladies."

"You're entirely right," I stated, which seemed to put Maurey in a pleasant mood, if his hearty laugh was anything to judge by.

"So anyway, old-timer, what do you say we hurry up and get this over with?"

"Sure thing," he agreed and explained his situation to us.

Maurey nodded a few times before saying, "So it's all right if we put this down as you wanting to get a new whetstone? Could you show us the one you've got?"

"Yes. It's this one here."

The bearded shopkeeper set the well-loved whetstone on the

counter with a clunk. It had broken up into four uneven pieces and really did seem like it needed replacing.

“Looks like a fetch quest to me. For F-rank jobs, the reward’s three thousand rins. We’ll have an adventurer buy one in a town somewhere. You’ll pay for the cost of the whetstone separately.”

“Mm-hmm. I suppose that’s how it’s gotta be. I can’t leave the shop unattended. I could ask my wife to do it, but she doesn’t know the first thing about whetstones...,” the shopkeeper remarked.

I took another fresh look around the store. It looked just as I remembered—there was a lot of hardware for everyday living.

“Excuse me,” I said.

“Whatcha want there, rookie?” Maurey asked.

“Yes. What is it?” the shopkeeper appended.

“Do you not have any other whetstones?”

“Hunh?” Maurey lifted an eyebrow. “C’mon. This guy wouldn’t be filing a quest out of it if he had another, would he? Out of all the things that could’ve come out of your mouth, that’s what you say?”

“When it comes to whetstones, you generally need three kinds. Since you stock household supplies, you might be able to get by with only one type, but I believe you also sharpen swords, don’t you?” I questioned.

“Yes, that’s right,” replied the shopkeeper. “When I only have one method of sharpening them, it changes the blade edge, offsets the balance, and could even make the weapon harder to wield.”

“Hmph,” Maurey snorted. “Why’ve you got to make such a fuss about this?”

“To the layperson, it may not seem like a big deal, but a weapon is something a person wagers their entire self on. It’s your partner in life and death. Naturally, anyone would want to keep good care of their weapons in the long term,” I explained.

“Guess you’re right...”

Sharpening was a vocation—to the point that some craftsmen devoted themselves solely to it. The road to reaching virtuoso in that profession was long. Asking a small-town secondhand shop to strive to that level must have been a difficult job.

“I know a shop that specializes in whetstones. They have some that are quite easy to use. What would you say to having the adventurer buy one there?”

Whetstones there wouldn’t be that expensive. I crossed out the three thousand rin reward that Maurey had written down.

“How would you feel about offering an eight thousand rin reward? That would include the cost of the whetstone. We can have them buy a specific one, too, and they can haggle for a lower price. That’ll depend on how skilled the adventurer is at talking, though.”

A capable barterer would be able to take home more of the reward money.

“Yeah, that sounds great! An adventurer wouldn’t know much about whetstones. If we didn’t tell them which to buy, who knows what they’d come back with,” agreed the shopkeeper.

Maurey’s proposition had left the purchase price unknown. There was a chance the contracted adventurer could buy a poor-quality whetstone or one that was inordinately expensive.

“With this, an F-rank adventurer will be able to take on the quest, so we can keep it at rank F.”

“Well, I’m not so sure about all of this. I don’t think this is that great of an idea,” Maurey muttered behind me. “Isn’t eight thousand pretty steep? Pretty sure we could get it cheaper...”

Evidently, he couldn’t accept that my plan was the one being used rather than his own. However, he didn’t seem to know which part to criticize.

“I’m just on observation today,” I said. Maurey seemed to take the hint.

“...Well, in that case, sure! All right, let’s go with that!” Once he realized that he’d get credit, he perked right back up. “Still, I don’t think anyone’s gonna expect a secondhand shop to give them that kind of quality sharpening.”

“That might be true. But it would make me pretty happy for my customers to tell me that their weapons work well,” replied the shopkeeper.

“If a blade lost its edge, why not just buy a new one?” Maurey asked, oblivious. He’d probably never been saved by his weapon before.

I didn’t carry any particular armament, but that was just because I’d established that as my own style. When I’d first started out as an assassin, I’d used a specific old knife all the time. It had saved my life on at least three occasions.

“Use a weapon long enough, and you form an emotional bond,” I explained.

We finished our work assigning the quest’s rank, and Maurey and I left the secondhand shop.

“You sure know a lot about random stuff. What was your old job again?” inquired Maurey on our walk back to the office.

“I was an assassin.”

“An assassin? Oh, I get it, you got me! Ha-ha-ha! An assassin? Ha-ha-ha! That’d be scary!”

It seemed Maurey had really taken a liking to my “joke.”

Invited to Drinks

Once a month, we would formally close the branch office. On that day, we wouldn't have any reception-desk duties, which allowed us to get clerical work done. We would come in before noon, then stay until late into the evening. The night before, some employees went out for drinks.

"Argan, come with us tonight, will you?!" one of my male coworkers put his hands together and begged. "The girls at this party are gonna be incredible. There'll be adventurers, and there's a maid who works at an aristocrat's place! Having you around helps us out. Well, actually, if you're not there, they won't even look at us... You get it, right? C'mon, please!"

This coworker was my senior and had helped me a few times.

The group total was eight, four men and four women. It wasn't as though we were trying to get intel from them, so I didn't understand why we were having a meal with ladies we didn't know and had never seen before. That's why I'd turned the previous invitations down.

"Even Hilda from the bakery is going to be comiiing!" my colleague pleaded.

"I'm not sure what to do with that information..."

"You haven't got a girl, right? Wouldn't any normal guy come out to drinks to find his match?!"

"Normal," he says?

As Shane begged me with tears in his eyes, I finally gave in. "All right. If that's the case, then I will. But I haven't done this much myself, so I can't guarantee I'll know the proper etiquette."

"That's fine! Completely fine! Thank you! Thank you!"

Overjoyed, my colleague gave me a firm handshake. Apparently, he really wanted to get closer to this Hilda girl, who was a baker's daughter.

From the guild, only I, the coworker who'd begged me, someone who'd started working around the same time as him, and Maurey would be going.



By the time we were done with work, the four of us were the only ones left in the office.

"All right...the guild entrance is the rendezvous spot. They should be here soon..." Shane, the guy who had been the one pleading with me earlier, fidgeted as he looked out the window.

Shane, our coworker Rein, and Maurey formed a huddle. It looked like they were having some kind of meeting.

"Listen up, you wusses, this is all about teamwork," Shane said.

"I know that. You're going for the baker, and I'm going for the maid. Hey, Maurey, what about you?" Rein asked.

"Me? I'm going with the flow. If I see a cutie, I'll try my luck. That's my plan. I don't really care if anyone's going after one of them or not."

"I just said this is about teamwork, you moron."

"You better not throw a wrench into things."

Shane and Rein quickly voiced their disapproval.

"Look, if a girl comes on to me, I'm not gonna say no," Maurey shot back.

"None of them are gonna hit on you."

"In your dreams."

"Don't...say that..."

I looked out the window and spied some women waiting outside.

I informed Shane, Rein, and Maurey, then we left from the back exit and met up with the ladies waiting out front.

Each had a lovely face. They were wearing attractive outfits that exposed a lot of leg and such.



We headed out to a small restaurant on a side street. Shane claimed he visited this place all the time.

They had me sit at the very end. My senior coworkers sat across from each of the women they were going after. A petite and quiet woman was seated across from me.

No time was wasted ordering food and drink, and the wine was delivered quickly. After a light toast, we began to chat. I took a sip of my drink and picked at the food.

"How about we start with introductions?" Shane blurted out, so we introduced ourselves one at a time.

It seemed the maid and Hilda were friends. A female adventurer who seemed to be a swordswoman knew Hilda, too.

Maurey had been staring at the adventurer's giant breasts for a while. He wasn't an incredibly complicated guy. It was apparent to

anyone with a brain that he was gawking.

Maurey, she's looking at you like you're trash. Notice already.

The last girl, the one across from me, was also an adventurer, a mage. She was soft-spoken and docile.

I was the last one to introduce myself.

"I'm Roland Argan. I'm a newer employee. I've learned a lot from my coworkers at the guild. It's nice to meet you." I bowed my head slightly.

Eagerly, the maid raised her hand. "Um, so Milia said that you're amazing at your job."

"This is that guy? I heard about you, too! Milia said that you're quiet, but when push comes to shove, you always get the job done!" Hilda continued as though she'd just remembered.

I see. They all seem to know Milia. Well, I suppose that's a small town for you.

"I just do my job," I replied.

The two women gazed at me so intently I could practically feel it. However, I also sensed my coworkers' irritated eyes boring into me. Except for Maurey, that is. He was still entranced by that one girl's chest.

I wish he'd knock it off.

Evidently, Hilda and the maid still had questions for me. Shane was eyeing the former, and Rein was going for the latter, if I remembered correctly.

"Hilda, you work at that bakery, don't you? Shane is always raving about your products, saying how delicious they are. He's brought in a few and shared them with people in the office," I stated.

I glanced at Shane, who nodded slightly. Under the table, he was giving me a thumbs-up. He and Hilda started a conversation.

"That's right. I love the bread at your shop."

"Oh! You're the guy who always comes in the afternoon, right?"

"Yeah! That's me!"

It seems like he can take it from here.

Next was the maid, who worked for Lord Bardel.

"Your job seems like it would be tough. I'm sure Lord Bardel's something of a sexual harasser?" I remarked jokingly.

Come on, Maurey, I'm talking about you, too, staring at her like that. Quit sipping your drink while ogling her.

"You know, he actually is. I'm thinking of quitting soon and finding work in the royal capital," responded the maid.

"Rein, you originally worked at the capital, didn't you?" I asked, glancing at the man, who was looking at me as though he were beholding a god.

They, too, began to chat.

“Did you truly?”

“Yes. I was at the capital’s Adventurers Guild. It’s as busy as you’d expect there—great place, really.”

“I’ve never lived in another town and...”

That should take care of those two.

Being the center of conversation didn’t suit me, especially since my coworkers fancied Hilda and her maid friend. I activated Unobtrusive, content to sit in my corner and enjoy a drink.

After a while, my skill’s effect wore off. However, by then, the conversation among the four was in full swing. None of them needed my assistance.

My eyes met that of the swordswoman, who was draining her cup.

“You drinking?” she inquired.

“I did get something. Seems like you enjoy your wine,” I answered.

“I do. You never know what’ll happen when you’re an adventurer. I’m of the mind that when you get the opportunity to drink, you keep pounding them down,” the swordswoman explained.

“It seems like a tough line of work. I understand,” I responded.

Maurey, reeking of booze, interjected, “Heeeey, rookie, you better not try getting your grubby hands on *my* boobs.”

They’re not yours. And she’s looking at you like you’re trash again.

“Just let me get in a little squeeze.”

I jabbed Maurey in the side, making sure no one would notice. He fainted.

“Looks like he had a little more than he could handle,” the swordswoman observed, relieved. We shared a laugh.

My other coworkers let Maurey be, content to focus on the ladies they admired. Meanwhile, I spoke with the swordswoman and shy mage.

“I’ve heard of you! Everyone says you’re some kind of super guild employee! They say that if Argan gives you a quest, no one gets hurt,” the swordswoman said, praising me.

“That’s an exaggeration,” I refuted modestly.

“I’ve...heard the same thing...,” the mage added, finally speaking up a bit.

I’d been wondering what connection she had to the others. As it happened, she’d worked with the swordswoman on a few previous jobs.

“The adventurers I know...they all say...that you’re the best one at the guild...”

“I simply lead people to where they can realize their full potential. They do the hard work. It’s their abilities that deserve the credit.”

“What are you hiding under that goody-goody facade?” the

swordswoman pressed.

“Keep pace with me. That might lubricate things enough to get me to talk.”

“Ha-ha. Sounds interesting. I’m game.” With a fearless grin, the swordswoman chugged her wine. “I’ll happily drink along with you.”

I grinned—deliberately—and also emptied my cup.

Shane and Rein spent the rest of the night laughing with Hilda and the maid. Before we knew it, the restaurant was closing, and we had to leave.

“Argan! We’ll pay for you today! Really, thank you so much!”

“I’m so grateful you came! Thank you!”

Grateful for my help, my two coworkers generously footed the bill.

“Well, we’ll head out now, too,” one of the women said.

“Roland, let’s eat out together again sometime!”

Hilda and the maid avoided Shane and Rein’s invitations to go to a second location and quickly departed. Regardless, the men thought themselves triumphant and staggered home together with arms around the other’s shoulders.

“Ughhh...Rowand, you went too hawrd on me...”

I carried the inarticulate swordswoman on my back as I accompanied the mage to where she was staying.

When I bid her good night and started to leave, she called out to me, “Uh...um...”

“Yes?”

“...You’re a popular guild staffer, and I haven’t requested your help yet, but...ne...next time...when I get a quest...could I ask...for you?”

“Sure. If you’re fine with having someone like me help you.”

“Uh! Y-yes...! G-good...night...”

I was sure the soft-spoken mage hadn’t had anything to drink, but she was red in the face. She waved at me until out of sight.

As for the swordswoman...I think her name was Diana?

“Diana, where is your inn? Or do you have a house?”

“Over there.”

Following her directions, we came upon a deserted mill by the river. She got off my back, then pulled me inside and closed the door. I could hear the quiet creaking of the waterwheel turning.

“Is this where you live?” I inquired.

“Nope. No one comes here, which makes it very useful. I heard about it from another adventurer...”

So that’s what she was up to.

I cupped my hand around her neck and kissed her.

“I told you. When you’re an adventurer, you have no idea when

something might happen. That's why...I live without any regrets."

Moonlight flickering through the cracks in the structure revealed her pale thighs. With one hand, she undid the belt that fastened her sword to her hip. It readily slipped down and clunked as it hit the ground.

"When I heard you were coming, I decided to put in a little extra effort...", the swordswoman admitted.

"What an honor."

"Would you like to see *where* I put that effort?"

◆ Maurey ◆

"Mister, mister, please wake up."

Maurey, facedown on the table, woke up to a restaurant worker shaking him.

"Huh...why was I asleep...?"

"All of the other members of your group headed home. And we're also closed."

"Huh? Oh, sure..."

That was odd. He was sure he'd felt up her chest, but maybe that had been a dream?

3

A Betrothal Meeting with the Prince of the Neighboring Nation, Part I

“Pardon me,” I said as I entered the branch manager’s office and closed the door. “Did you need me for something?”

“Yes. It’s a rather important matter this time.” Seeming grave, Iris sighed. After the usual morning meeting, she’d invited me to her office.

Although she had made private requests of me in the past, I felt that this was slightly different.

“Her Highness Princess Almelia has an upcoming betrothal interview with the first prince of the Holy Land of Rubens.”

“What a joyous occasion.”

“...Well, I suppose it is. The reason I wanted to talk to you is because the king has asked that you serve as Her Highness’s escort.”

“Me? For Almelia...for Her Highness, you mean?”

Does she really need an escort?

“You know Her Highness personally, don’t you? I think that’s why —”

“Um, Branch Manager.”

“I know, I know. She’s the princess, but she’s also the hero who defeated the demon lord...”

I had to wonder just how much Iris knew about me. The guild master had told her about some of my activities as an assassin, but not everything. Based on what Iris said, it was likely she wasn’t aware I’d been part of the hero party or that I’d been the one who actually defeated the demon lord.

“I was given a letter from the king addressed to you.” Iris pulled out a letter with a red wax seal from her desk drawer. I took it and put it into my pocket. I more or less knew what it said already.

It undoubtedly detailed how Almelia was whining and how the king would feel more reassured with me around—something to that effect.

Something told me that a *normal* guild employee wouldn’t ever be charged with guarding royalty or fielding requests directly from them...

“If you don’t accept, it’ll cause trouble for me, too. I’m sorry, but if you could...” Iris trailed off, which wasn’t like her.

Since this was a request coming from a superior, I suppose it was only wise to accept.

“Understood,” I acquiesced, and Iris immediately went into the particulars of the job.

With that done, I got ready and headed out to the prearranged rendezvous point.





“Really now, they do enjoy making you do arbitrary tasks, don’t they, knave?”

As I’d been getting ready, Rila had blurted out that she would be coming with me. She was currently in her feline form, and her head was peeking out of my pack. I wasn’t carrying much. In fact, my load was around ninety percent cat.

“A *normal* guild employee wouldn’t turn down a request from his superior,” I said.

“Do you genuinely think that is how it works?”

I spotted the king and the princess’s caravan right away. A contingent of one hundred knights guarded their carriages. Since they weren’t going to battle, that seemed a reasonable number.

Introducing myself to so many soldiers seemed obnoxious. Thus, I activated Unobtrusive and quickly slipped past them, swiftly making my way into the middle of the formation.

“...There they are.”

I found a buggy that was more conspicuous than the rest and crept inside.

“Hmm, *smooch, smooch, smooch*. Oh, Solarissss.”

“Oh, my King, must you? You’re so naughty. ♡ That tickles. ♡”

It looked like things were getting heated between King Randolph and the beautiful woman who usually attended to him.

“I can’t believe you’d go out of your way to call me for something as small as a betrothal interview,” I stated flatly.

“NGaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAH?!”

“YEeeEEK?!”

“Sorry for interrupting your fun. You, scram.” I looked down at the half-undressed woman and motioned for her to go outside with a jerk of my chin.

“Y-yes, sirrrr...”

The carriage came to a halt. The woman pulled on a coat and quickly left.

“Wh-why you little...! H-how dare you barge in here unannounced!” King Randolph exclaimed

“You’re the one who called me here.”

The king quickly fixed his somewhat disheveled clothes.

“You read the letter, then? Based on how you’re acting, it seems like you haven’t.”

“King Randolph, it’s not my intention to associate closely with the royal family.”

“I know that. I apologized when asking for your assistance in the letter. Still, if you didn’t want to fulfill my request, you wouldn’t have wasted any time turning me down, am I right?”

“That’s certainly true.”

Based on his tone, it didn’t seem like he would force me to do this job. When I thought back on it, Iris hadn’t outright commanded me to do it, either.

“So, what’ll it be? I won’t force you into anything. The meeting point is neutral ground—no weapons. Call it manners, rules, tradition, or what have you. You would be an incredibly comforting presence, considering the situation. That’s what I had in mind...”

In combat, I could operate without an armament. If things went sour, King Randolph wanted me for protection. Iris would likely want me to accept this request.

“I’ve already come all this way,” I said.

“You will be of great help.” A good-natured smile bloomed over King Randolph’s face.

“So then, my mission is to guard. I don’t need all the details, but if there’s anything that would make my job easier, I’d be grateful if you could fill me in.”

“You’re as...how should I put this...stalwart? Serious? As usual... unfortunately, I don’t have much that would be of use.”

The Holy Land of Rubens neighbored the Felind Kingdom. The two nations had been allies in the war against the demon lord. In the pecking order, the Holy Land of Rubens ranked only a step behind the Felind Kingdom when it came to influence.

This was because Elvie, who was from Rubens, had been part of the party of heroes. Incidentally, Felind’s own status was so high because of Almelia.

The nations mirrored each other in power.

“The envoy from the Holy Land of Rubens was Elvie Elk Hayden...the knight,” King Randolph informed.

“Hmm, so it was Elvie... I suppose she is the daughter of a marquis,” I replied.

“Mm-hmm. She and Almelia are close. We can’t simply reject the offer and insult her like that.”

Elvie was like a put-together, no-nonsense older sister, while Almelia more resembled a tomboyish, stubborn little sister—the two of them were almost siblings in that way.

Diplomacy with allies was several times more complicated to deal with than the war with the demon lord’s army. When it came to that, I was a layman, so I decided not to butt in with my own opinions.

“...So I had a thought. Even if Almelia doesn’t say she likes First Prince Fabian Toib Rubens, she doesn’t seem too dissatisfied with

him..."

Neither country could be called a superpower. This union would help secure their alliance.

"King Randolph, you really have matured, haven't you?" I remarked.

"Ha-ha-ha...I suppose I have."

"However, I recommend against fooling around with women in your carriage. I could hear you from outside."

"I *let* the people hear. The soldiers must be bored, simply trudging about." The man let out a hearty laugh.

Oh, come on. I was exasperated but couldn't help but smile.

"Sex has addled this king's mind." The demon lord, who also had been a ruler herself, seemed likewise appalled.

We were heading to a place that was considered a neutral area by both sides, the Somaleel coast. The locale was frequented by vacationing aristocrats and, as a resort destination, catered to the rich.

Since we weren't on a strict schedule, we stopped at a town along the way for a rest.

I considered paying a visit to Almelia, but I decided to hold off for the time being. I wanted to learn more about the job.

"King Randolph, are the imperial knights your only protection?"

"Yes. That's right. I'll introduce you to their leader." He called for a knight, who immediately walked over.

He was a slender man with his longish hair tied up behind his head. While older than me, he was still young.

Rila giggled from my pack. She was likely thinking the same thing I was.

"This is the third head knight of the imperial order of chivalry, Gregor Schaech. He's been charged with command of this escort. And this would be...um..." King Randolph didn't seem to know how to introduce me, so I did it for him.

"I am a guild employee, Roland Argan. I will be joining your guard."

"Pfft." Unable to help himself, Gregor burst into laughter. "I was wondering who you could be since His Majesty went out of his way to introduce you. And you just turn out to be some lowly staffer? Ha-ha-ha!"

Members of the imperial knights tended to be the sons of famous nobles, ostensibly so they could earn the royal family's favor. Gregor seemed to be of the same haughty ilk.

"I only recently joined, but..." I muttered

"Ha-ha-ha... That's absurd!"

"I guess you didn't see me arrive, then?"

"Huh?" Gregor looked confused.

“Oh...Roland, don't pick on him too much...,” King Randolph whispered into my ear.

My job was to safeguard the king and Almelia. However, if the other guards were sloppily organized, I wouldn't be able to protect my charges.

I posed a question to King Randolph. “Who knew that I was coming here?”

“...Until you arrived...I was the only one, as the person who called you.”

It wasn't as though I'd been using my full capabilities on the way to the king's carriage. I had used my skill, but I'd been moving at the same speed as a typical person for most of the way here. My skill, Unobtrusive, didn't fully erase my presence. It didn't even make me invisible.

So long as the soldiers were paying close attention and kept vigilant, they should have been able to see me clearly.

“I walked right into the king's carriage... What were your men even doing?”

“...Uh.”

“To let your guard down is to let order down. The reverse is also true. The knights in your command were busy chatting among themselves. They hardly even let a suspicious individual's approach stop themselves from having a grand time,” Rila popped her head out of my pack and quipped.

Since it would be trouble having them find out about her, I pretended I'd said it.

“We're heading to a resort destination that caters to royalty and nobility. Yet, they're acting like this is a field trip.”

“You little...!”

Gregor placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. However, I didn't let him draw it. I stepped closer to him in an instant and held down the pommel with my own hand.

“I can't draw— Wh-when did you do that?!”

“If I had been an assassin, the king would have already been dead. Would you be willing to take responsibility for that, Gregor? No, even that wouldn't be enough. Were the king to perish, I don't think anyone would bat an eye if all your relatives were executed.”

“.....” Gregor stared at me dubiously as the blood drained from his face.

“Do you really think your knights are doing their best?”

“Knave, why must you pick on a child who has never seen the battlefield?” Rila asked, despite sounding like she was enjoying this. “I wonder, did this nation grow fat and lazy after winning the war? You have fools throwing their weight around when their only redeeming

characteristic is their pedigree, it seems.”

Since Rila was awfully talkative, I forced her back into my pack.

“Mrwow?! Wh-what do you think you are—?”

“...Head of knights, would you entrust your command to this man?” King Randolph asked.

“B-but...as the head of knights, what would I do then?”

“This one here will make no mistakes, even if an emergency were to present itself.”

“Why do you trust him so much?”

“Roland was something of a teacher to Almelia.”

“H-he’s Lady Almelia’s instructor?!”

After taking several steps back, Gregor reverently bowed his head.

“...I apologize for my rudeness. Master Roland, just as His Majesty has stated, may I entrust the guard’s command with you?”

“If that’s what you want. Leave it to me.”



I gathered the guardsmen and adjusted their tactics.

It seemed many of the knights were discontent with me waltzing in to run the show at first, but after Gregor told them, “He was Lady Almelia’s teacher,” they started to follow my instructions without much fuss.

“Please gather in ten groups of ten and encircle His Majesty’s carriage.”

Before, their arrangement had been haphazard and loose.

Since the princess’s carriage was near King Randolph’s, I didn’t think we’d needed to worry about her.

“Choose two people to act as messengers and see that they are mounted.”

“Huh...but what about the commanding officers...?” someone questioned.

“They will be walking,” I replied.

“...Well, but...normally, the officers are mounted...”

“If you want to travel in comfort, then be a messenger. When any group notices an abnormality, please send your messengers to me in the center.”

While the knights regarded my orders with confusion, they did as they were bid. That done, the royal caravan resumed its journey.

Rila poked her head out from a gap in my pack. “Are you sure you don’t need to go to visit that hero child?”

We were currently on horseback. Behind me were the king and princess’s carriages, side by side.

“She has no need of a guard. I don’t see the point in greeting her.”

“Hmm,” Rila hummed. “Well, this has shaped up to be a smart formation. It’s simple, yet each group seems to understand its roles. When we arrived, everyone was idle.”

“I told them to let me know if they see anything strange. It’s best to keep instructions for rank-and-file soldiers as simple as possible.”

“It’s quite the improvement over when we first arrived. They were completely distracted, chatting idly with one another.”

“Humans flock together. And being in a large group gives them a false sense of security. Now each person only has nine others with them. They should be slightly more vigilant.”

Rila let out a long sigh behind me. “Would you consider joining the demon lord’s army?”

I couldn’t help but grin. “And where exactly is that mighty force?”

“The thought just happened to cross my mind that, had I possessed someone like you, I might well have won the war,” Rila remarked.

“It seems that I’m more capable than the demon lord herself, then. If I’d joined your army, you would have needed to watch your neck while you slept, O Great Demon Lord,” I quipped back.

Mrowl! She scratched the back of my head. Apparently, I’d said something out of turn.

After a while, Rila whispered to me, “I—I could whip up another army...in an instant... If you and I...were blessed with a child...” After she said that, she plunged back into my pack, embarrassed. Though her forces had dwindled in number, a new little contingent could be very cozy indeed.

The scent of salt water began to waft along with the breeze, a sign that we were nearing the Somaleel coast. Along the horizon, I saw several opulent buildings that served as vacation homes for the wealthy.

One of the messenger knights came running to me.

“The ninth group! Enemy attack! We believe it’s a band of robbers!”

We had formed a circle with ten groups and stationed guards everywhere except at twelve and six o’clock.

The ninth group was at the ten o’clock position. We were on the road to a relaxation point for the rich. To bandits, this was probably a given location when it came to setting an ambush.

“How many?” I asked.

“Between twenty and forty.”

Another messenger came running from ten o’clock.

“The ninth group! There are even more robbers! About one hundred of them.”

“Go tell the eighth and tenth to cluster to protect the ninth. Send this message to the other groups as well: Keep up your guard and don’t panic.”

“Yes, sir,” they said and hurriedly rode off.

“This is starting to smell quite fishy. One hundred is quite a lot for a gang of thieves,” Rila observed.

“We need to be on our guard and ensure there are no other enemies around us,” I said.

I reported the information to King Randolph. Almelia could figure out what was going on by herself, but it was best to keep this news from her, if possible.

With a light kick, I spurred my horse into a gallop. The ninth group faced a forest. That was likely where the robbers had been hiding in wait. Visibility in the other directions was good, so if any foes had approached, they would have stood out against the terrain. After confirming that, I headed over to the three groups that had clustered for battle.

“I suppose they are still knights, even if terrible ones. It seems they are doing better in closed arrangement than I expected,” Rila commented as she watched the fight.

The group of thirty proved capable. When I saw some of the robbers trying to skirt around their formation, I approached one of the knights while still on horseback.

“I’ll be borrowing this,” I stated, then drew the sword at his waist.

After a few moments, the heads of those thieves who’d attempted to sneak past were falling.

“...”

“What is the matter, knave?”

“...No, nothing.”

I glanced at the decapitated corpses, then returned to the knights.

“Maintain the formation! Show those thieves that the imperial knights are not just valiant in name!” I cried.

““““Hrahhhhhhh!””””

“You have impeccable timing with your rallying speeches,” Rila muttered.

“Stay in the pack. It’s dangerous.”

I scanned the group of robbers, looking for a leader.

“...Found you.”

I leaped off the horse and made for the person who seemed to be in charge of the enemy force. From his stance, I could tell he was a

formidable opponent who knew a thing or two about the art of war.

“...”

My sudden entry into the fight didn't ruffle him in the slightest. He only readied his spear to meet my approach. However, then he glanced away from me, looking in a completely different direction.

“Shouldn't you be paying attention to the enemy in front of you?”

“...”

The thief leader rushed at me, throwing his entire weight into the charge as he let fly a fearsome yell. I parried and struck the tip of his weapon upward. Using the spear's back end, he tried to hit me. I stopped it with a single hand and pulled on his pole arm.

“Uh? Whoaaa?!”

With a thud, the man tumbled over. It was then that he finally abandoned his spear and drew his sword. No sooner had he done so, however, than his hand, still clutching his blade, flew through the air. That had been my doing, of course.

“Wha— Huh?!”

“Good attempt—that attack had a lot of power behind it, but...”

I discarded my sword and picked up the spear. As I did, the bandit leader tried to use flame magic.

“A jab from a spear is meant to be faster than the wind and sharper than lightning. Your strike was lacking, to say the least.”

It had been a while since I'd used a pole arm. Still, I threw my weight into a mighty thrust, like I was one with the weapon.

Swifter than sound, the tip raced forward. There was a shock wave as I skewered my opponent's face.

With their leader slain, the other robbers started fleeing into the woods.

“You're not pursuing them?” Rila pressed.

“Killing the enemy isn't part of this job.”

I wouldn't pursue opponents with no will to fight. I dropped the spear and turned around to find the knights had fallen out of their formation. While some of them were lightly wounded, we had no severe casualties.

“Well done. It seems that you knights are more reliable than I gave you credit for,” I said with a smile, which made them start buzzing.

“H-hey, he just praised us...”

“We just got a compliment from the hero's teacher...!”

“I'm so happy...”

They all looked delighted.

“Lovely use of the carrot and the stick. Heh. All they did was move as you told them to, though.” Rila revealed the truth and almost undid all my work. Thankfully, in their current mood, the knights

didn't notice and remained vigilant while on escort duty.

"Where's the enemy?!" Almelia, with her sword ready for blood, leaped from her carriage.

She'd caught wind of the attack. I'd thought this might happen, which is why I'd informed only King Randolph.

"Oh, Lady Almelia, you cannot!"

Heedless of her lady-in-waiting's pleas, the princess panted excitedly.

"Calm down, Almelia. The enemies are gone."

"...?! Roland! Wh-what are you doing here?!" Almelia ran over to me. "You didn't come to stop the marriage, did you?!"

Rila snickered at that. "Her eyes practically sparkle. It hurts to see a lovelorn maiden."

"Shush," I whispered as I pushed the black cat back into my bag.

"It's not like...I was actually serious about this betrothal meeting, s-so it's not cheating or anything."

Cheating? I had no idea what she meant.

"..."

After I had undone Real Nightmare, Rila and Roje had both retained memories of being dogs.

The same must have been true for Almelia.

As such, she must have incorrectly believed that I'd snuck into her room at night to steal her first kiss.

"King Randolph asked me directly to guard you. That's all this is," I explained.

"Hmm? I've seen through you, you know—I know you're never straightforward!" Almelia grinned as she looked at me.

"I'm telling the truth."

Right as I tried to drive Almelia away, a messenger came running to us.

"Tenth group report! A party that we believe to be part of the Holy Land of Rubens is heading our way. And among them, we saw a flag lined with gold we believe to be used by their royal family."

"...I see. Almelia, why don't you greet them and—?"

Before I could finish, Almelia ran back to her carriage with a speed I'd never witnessed from her before.

I told the knights to let the approaching party through and went to report as much to King Randolph.



“Mm-hmm. We’re nearly on the coast. Perhaps they heard the commotion as they were traveling and came to offer us reinforcements.”

A man leading a single group came galloping to us on horseback. I’d seen him before. He was Rubens’s First Prince Fabian—the man Almelia was meeting for betrothal.

During the war, he had led Rubens’s army, though not directly from the front line. Blond and charming, he was a handsome young man. I’d heard on the battlefield that the prince was quite popular.

He was hardly even twenty. Behind him, a woman who seemed to be a personal assistant was waiting.

“King Randolph, I am glad to see that nothing grave has occurred.”

Prince Fabian came off his horse and kneeled in front of the carriage.

“Your Highness Prince Fabian, let us cast aside such stiff formalities. I’m grateful you have come all this way to bring us reinforcements.”

“Not at all! We simply happened to pass by and noticed the unusual amount of shouting.”

“We owe our survival all to this man. He’s quite the reliable sort.” King Randolph laughed. Since he had brought attention to me, I briefly introduced myself.

“I’m Roland Argan. I’ve been entrusted with these forces to protect the king on this occasion. I normally act as a guild employee.”

“Oh? And did you capture the leader of the insurgents?”

“No, I killed him.”

“...I see. Quite a feat.” Fabian flashed his white teeth at me as he gave me a charming smile. “I’d like to greet Almelia,” the prince decided. However, Almelia didn’t seem to be doing well, so I informed him that he couldn’t.

“My lord, we must make haste, or we will keep His Majesty waiting,” the woman who was Prince Fabian’s assistant said from behind him.

“I know. Well then, King Randolph, let us meet again later on.”

He climbed back onto his horse and left. The assistant gave us a brief bow and followed after him.

Inside the carriage, King Randolph told me, “He’s handsome, and though I’m not sure how capable he is when it comes to politics, you can’t disregard his popularity.”

“A marriage between him and Almelia could be bigger than the demon lord’s death,” I remarked.

“Mm-hmm. That’s exactly right.”

Our caravan continued down the road.



After about thirty minutes, we reached the Somaleel coast.

I could hear the demure sounds of the waves.

“Oh! Hoh-hoooooh!” Rila took quite an interest, poking her head out of my pack. “A blue sky, a blue ocean, and a white beach...! It seems this region is truly divine! I do not sense the presence of any monsters whatsoever. What sort of place is this?”

She demanded to be let out, so I did and returned her to her human form.

“I shall enjoy myself here for a while!”

There was an innocent glitter to her eyes, and I couldn’t bring myself to stop her.

Our group was going to be staying at King Randolph’s vacation home. While we were indoors, I served as more than enough protection. Additionally, no weapons were permitted on neutral ground, so even if he had knights guarding him, they wouldn’t be able to do much.

Almelia, King Randolph, and those who served them gathered in the living room. The beautiful woman who waited on King Randolph explained how things would go.

“Tonight, the king of Rubens, Prince Fabian, King Randolph, and Lady Almelia will dine together alone.”

This was the same woman the king had been fooling around with in the carriage on the way over. Her official position was as a secretary. As she informed everyone of the various aspects of the schedule, Almelia raised her hand.

“My stomach is upset, so I’ll pass...”

“Lady Almelia, you cannot refuse now after coming all this way.”

Despite being scolded, Almelia showed no intention of listening.

“Now, Almelia, don’t act that way. It’s just a meal and some conversation,” King Randolph said, placating her.

“Nghhh...” She frowned and firmly refused to cooperate.

“Hey, Almelia,” I called.

“Wh-what...?” She timidly looked my way.

“A true princess should be slightly more mature.”

“Ughhhh.” She was whining like a siren, but finally gave in.

The first night, she and Prince Fabian would talk over a meal. The next day, they were to spend some time alone. Almelia needed to doll herself up, so she retired to her room.

That was when Elvie arrived.

“Your Majesty, it has been much too long.”

“Stop that. There’s no need for formalities here. I hadn’t expected you to come for the occasion,” King Randolph replied.

“Yes, Your Majesty. I was worried about Almelia, so I have taken on the privileged role of joining the two families as a member of the House of Haydence. So then...where is Almelia—? Oh! Roland!”

Our eyes met, and I put up a hand and waved hello.

“Wh-where have you been? We looked everywhere for you! We thought you were dead...but we couldn’t accept that you’d die so easily...”

Elvie wiped away a tear from her eye. She was as formal and tender as ever.

“We’ll talk about what’s happened later. More importantly, Elvie, there’s something I’d like you to tell me.”



I found her.

She was currently wearing her civilian clothes and strolling by herself along the beach in the evening.

“Nice view, isn’t it?”

At present, the two kings and their children were around a table, enjoying food and drink.

Since Almelia was an exceptionally capable fighter, there was no need for my presence.

“Oh. You’re the head of the Felind guard.”

“I’ve been walking around hoping that I might bump into you. And here you are.”

“Ha-ha-ha, you were wandering aimlessly in search of me?” she said with an elegant laugh.

This woman was the second daughter of an earl. She had a first-rate upbringing—and body. Grace came naturally to one like her.

She was Prince Fabian’s assistant...and one beautiful woman among several favorites, or so Elvie had told me. Her name was Reinora.

“Would it be a disruption if I joined you?” I inquired.

“Not at all. It would not.”

My pretending that our encounter was coincidental was an effort to curry her favor.

We exchanged words about things anyone could talk about, the weather, the scenery, our jobs, and enjoyed ourselves. The sun set before long. When I invited Reinora to dinner, she hesitated slightly before perking up.

“This is my first time receiving an invitation like this from a

man...”

We made our way to a nearby restaurant, and when I told the staff that I was associated with the Felind royalty, they waived all fees. We enjoyed an exorbitantly priced meal and drinks.

By the time we left, it was well into the evening.

“It was sooo much fun eating with you, Mr. Roland.”

The alcohol might have been getting to Reinora. Her tone seemed more informal now.

“Miss Reinora, I have a quiet place where we can rest. Let’s have some drinks there.”

She looked grave for a moment, but then immediately started blushing. “What? Um...sure...”

We walked together, close. The dim light of magical lanterns lit our way. At the vacation home, I silently led her to the room I had been assigned.



After spending the night with Reinora, I took her back to her quarters. On the way home, I found Rila crying on the beach.

“I was so excited, I got lost and couldn’t find you...so I waited here...”

Rila, who had been so thrilled about the ocean and beach, had been searching for me all night.

“I see. I was in that holiday villa over there. Come on. Let’s get going.”

“That’s it?!”

Part of this was Rila’s fault, but I had also delayed coming to find her, because something had been bothering me.

I brought Rila to my room.

“I shall sleep!” she declared, collapsing right onto the bed with a heavy thump. Within seconds, she was snoring. I touched her collar and changed her into her cat form.

“...I suppose it’s almost time.”

Judging by the sun, the princess and the prince’s date was fast approaching. However, I had learned that there was more to it than a casual meeting. I needed to prepare.

Prince Fabian of the Holy Land of Rubens exhaled gingerly through his nose. Almelia was just as sullen as she had been the day before. She still spared him no courtesy. The most he could get out of her was “Yes, I suppose” or a distant, patronizing laugh.

It was midday, and the two were taking a refreshing stroll, but they shared no conversation, and the atmosphere between them had become even heavier than yesterday.

“Let’s take a break.”

“Yes, I suppose.”

They headed to a café Fabian recommended for its splendid view of the beach. After they made their orders, a waiter he was very familiar with brought them both pineapple juice.

“The juice here is delicious because they use first-rate, freshly squeezed stuff,” the prince said.

“I see.”

As usual, Almelia’s voice remained monotone and uncaring.

However, her cold attitude would soon change.

Fabian knew that Almelia didn’t want to be at this betrothal meeting and had no intention of marrying him. Internally, the man mused how delightful it would be to seize and flip her over as though she were in the palm of his hand.

He had never thought of himself as awkward with women, yet there was something different about this young lady. She didn’t want to meet with him, but she had come here because she was the princess, and as royalty, she had needed to keep up appearances for the sake of her country.

If things go as planned... Just the thought alone was nearly enough to sate Fabian’s dark appetite.

“...What is it?” Almelia questioned, perhaps sensing something.

“Nothing. You’re beautiful, so I couldn’t help but bask in how charming you are.”

“Uh-huh. I see.”

The look in her eyes was the sort one might have if they were looking at trash, but that only brought Fabian glee. He imagined what he would do to Almelia, who was eyeing him with such distaste, once she was at his beck and call. It brought him immense gratification.

Almelia took her straw and sipped. Fabian felt the urge to take her slender lips and desecrate them. A woman he desired but could not have. To Fabian, that was a first.

“How is it? It’s good, right?”

“Yes... Well, for what it is.”

Fabian partook of his own juice. The sweetness and acidity spread throughout his mouth. He couldn’t help but sigh from joy.

“Kree.”

Suddenly, a strange noise emanated from an unknown place.

“A monster?”

Though Fabian didn’t sense the presence of one, when he looked around, he spotted things that looked like tiny, shadowy humans tiptoeing away.

“...?”

Prince and princess silently drank their juice as the waves crashed.

After a while, Almelia stopped. Just as Fabian had expected, her eyes went blank. Fabian couldn’t help but chuckle to himself. It was outstanding—both quick acting and persistent.

“...Your Highness, Princess Almelia.”

“Yes, what is it?” This time, her response was wholly different. She conducted herself as though in the company of a lover. Fabian’s chest trembled when he finally received a proper response after she had been so indifferent until that point.

“I love you,” the man said.

“What? You can’t just blurt out something like that...”

Yes, she liked him. She wanted him so much, she felt embarrassed.

“I would like you to marry me and become the Holy Land of Rubens’s queen.”

“...Lord Fabian...” Almelia bashfully responded with a whispered “Yes.”

“Then let us hold a lunch with our fathers. We can inform them of the good news.”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

“Whereupon we will also share a kiss as evidence of our vow to one another.”

Naturally, Fabian intended to have Almelia sign a marriage contract that would function like a written vow.

“...I’m so embarrassed... But if it will serve as proof...then I will.”

After turning red, Almelia nodded with a charming smile on her face.

The two of them agreed to a clandestine meeting that night. There, Fabian would take the hero-princess who had shown no interest in him and defile her as he wished...

Fabian took Almelia to the vacation house, then told his parents of his triumph.

“Father, it went just as planned.”

“I see, so it went well. Ha-ha-ha, with this, the Felind Kingdom will soon be in our grasp.”

“I look forward to the luncheon.”

“As you should, Father.”

King Rubens’s laugh echoed through the room.

The luncheon was held at the Rubens’s vacation home. Unlike yesterday’s dinner, several close associates from both sides were in attendance. However, because lesser persons were not permitted to dine with royalty, they would take from separate plates. The cuisine was top class and made by the best chefs.

On the Rubens’s side, it was the king, Prince Fabian, Elvie, and two beautiful women serving Fabian. The Felind group was composed of their king, Almelia, the guild employee they claimed managed their guard retinue, and two knights.

Once all were present, Fabian stood up. “Before we begin our meal, there is something we would like to share with all of you.” He glanced at Almelia, who was looking down. She was still embarrassed. “I have proposed to Her Highness, Princess Almelia, and she has accepted.”

A stir ran through the assembled people.

“A-Almelia? I-is this true?!” King Randolph was bewildered.

“Almelia, d-did you really?!” Even Elvie, with whom she was close, was wide-eyed.

“Settle down, everyone. I know it’s quite sudden, but it seems that this luncheon has turned into an engagement celebration,” Fabian declared, then went to Almelia’s side. “Now, we shall seal our vow with a kiss.”

Unable to keep up with the whirlwind of revelations, everyone gasped. However, Almelia had already consented to this. Fabian was sure nothing could go wrong.

“Please don’t come any closer.”

“Huh? Why not?”

Fabian had grabbed Almelia’s slender shoulders and was puckering his lips.

KA-SLAAAAAM!

Yet, he was greeted only by a powerful slap to the face. It had quite the impressive sound.

The prince was blown backward, taking the food on the table with him as he collapsed gracelessly to the floor. His elegant suit was now adorned with a first-class meal.

“A kiss? Marriage? What? No way I’d do any of that! Gross.”

This time, Almelia wasn’t simply indifferent when it came to Fabian. She pinned him with a disgusted, cold glare.

“Wh-whaaat...what? How.....?! What’s going on...?!”

She’s returned to normal!

According to what Fabian had been told, the effects of the love potion should have endured for several months, possibly a year!

Who had done it?

What had they done?!

While the room was abuzz with confusion from the flabbergasting event, there was a single man who was watching the scene calmly from the corner of the room.

It was that guard, the guild employee.

When Fabian’s eyes met the man’s, he saw something like a sneer appear on his face.

It was him!!!

A Betrothal Meeting with the Prince of the Neighboring Nation, Part II

Almelia's slap sent Fabian flying. He left the food on the table in a mess as he tumbled to the floor.

"A kiss? What? Marriage? What? ...No way I'd do any of that. Gross."

"Wh-whaaat...what? Why.....?! What's going on...?!"

Prince Fabian's eyes darted around, bewildered by the unexpected state of affairs. When our eyes met, I found his behavior was so amusing I could not help but grin.

I had used Dispell to undo Almelia's abnormal state about half an hour before the luncheon based on intel I'd gathered about a particular plot.

Almelia's state had been caused by something like a Glamour spell. When she had come back from her date, her eyes had looked vacant, and she'd been incoherently mumbling the prince's name. I'd cast Dispell, but the effect of that nasty potion still took a while to lose effect fully.

Thankfully, it had worn off just in time.

"Fabian, what in the world is going on?!" King Rubens shouted.

"Father, this woman—she has struck me on the cheek!"

"Prince Fabian...would you be so kind as to offer us an explanation?" King Randolph, still seated and stone-faced, watched Prince Fabian with suspicion.

"That's what I'd like to know! Your daughter struck me out of nowhere!"

"Huh?" Almelia raised an eyebrow. She seemed rather angry. I could practically feel the rage coming off her. "It's because *you* suddenly tried to kiss me. Are you stupid or what? Are you a pervert? A molester?"

"Almelia, please calm down. You, too, Your Majesty. I don't understand what is happening," Elvie interjected, attempting to keep things from exploding.

"When I came to, the prince was right in front of me and trying to force me to kiss him."

“How was that forced?! Did you forget what you told me!”

Elvie shot me a troubled glance.

Apparently, Almelia had no memory from when she was ensorcelled by the love potion.

“Tch.” Prince Fabian clucked his tongue loudly.

Things were quickly devolving into back-and-forth accusations, which would get us nowhere. Thus, I cut the conversation short for the time being. “Princess Almelia returned from her date earlier in a delirious state. I ‘sobered her up’ in a way.”

“*So, it really was you!*” the hateful glare from Prince Fabian seemed to say.

“The princess has no memory of promising to marry you. For now, let’s say it was because of her intoxication.”

“Intoxication? All she had was a glass of pineapple juice because we were a touch tired from a stroll. How could that delude her senses? I think you would do well to keep your jokes to a minimum.”

“Then I will be more direct. Prince Fabian, you did something to alter the princess’s judgment. You waited for an opportunity to force her to consent to marry you. Am I wrong?”

I had seen the whole thing using the shadows I’d dispatched, so I knew exactly what had transpired...

Prince Fabian refused to admit defeat, offering more excuses. Left with no option, I asked the woman sitting across from me, “May I ask you to tell me what we talked about again? Prince Fabian had something prepared, is that right?”

Reinora, the assistant whom I’d shared a bed with the previous night, nodded.

“Yes, His Highness—”

“Y-you! What do you think you’re saying?! Hey!” Fabian desperately screeched at Reinora, but he wasn’t able to stop her.

“I was ordered to do it. They gave me a handsome amount of money and instructed me to tell the employee at the café to mix a love potion into the princess’s drink.”

Almelia looked down at Fabian as though she were staring at a bug. “You’re horrid.”

Elvie heaved a deep sigh, then said, “Your Highness, I believe I must also beg your pardon. Using a potion on the person you have your heart set on...doesn’t seem like something the future king of Rubens should do.”

“Sh-shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up!” Prince Fabian bawled while pointing at his traitorous servant. “You! You know what’s coming, don’t you?! Hunh? You’re the daughter of a lower noble house in the Holy Land of Rubens! You remember that when we

return home!!”

“I have no business with a man who always calls me ‘you.’”

Reinora had come from a lesser aristocratic family. Prince Fabian had taken a liking to her because of her looks. That was how she had received her current position as his assistant. Still, she did not seem to think highly of him.

“Your Highness, do you know my name?” she asked.

“...It’s...”

I looked Reinora in the eyes. Prince Fabian quickly picked up on the signal.

“Y-you...! You scoundrel! You’ve tried to entrap me!”

“What are you talking about? You’re the one who was doing the entrapping,” Almelia spat.

“Your Highness, please, think about who caused all of this for a moment.”

“Guh...!”

Reinora had, naturally, been reluctant to lay everything bare yesterday. I had reported everything to King Randolph and talked to him about it yesterday evening.

“The Felind Kingdom will be taking in Madam Reinora and her family, considering you have asked her to do something so inequitably dishonest. And, if she would like, we will maintain her current standing in our court.” When King Randolph, who had been silent until that point, spoke up, all eyes fell on him.

“Thank you, King Randolph. I will tell my family immediately so I can consult with them,” Reinora replied graciously.

In addition to the love potion ploy, there was something else I’d asked Reinora about the other day.

“The robbers that attacked us had been prepared in advance, hadn’t they?”

Any typical group of camping bandits would have been dirty, but those we’d encountered had clearly been bathing. Undoubtedly, Fabian had ordered a military unit to play the part of highwaymen. They hadn’t seemed fully invested during the fight, and the leader I’d killed had been distracted even though I’d been in front of him. My guess was that he’d been waiting for Prince Fabian to swoop in and play savior. It was a cheap trick to win Almelia’s affection.

“It seems you’ve seen through everything, Mr. Roland,” Reinora had admitted last night, elegantly laughing as she did so.

Prince Fabian ground his teeth as he leveled an indignant glare at

me. He was reaping what he had sowed.

"King Randolph, my foolish son seems to have done something terribly discourteous. I'd like to ask for your leniency." King Rubens inclined his head slightly. "The boy was so intent on having Lady Almelia that he acted of his own accord. He is inexperienced with life. I pray that you find it in your heart to forgive his transgression..."

Fabian's eyes went wide in terrible surprise. "F-Father! What are you...? B-but it was all originally—"

"...I gave you no such instructions... Am I wrong?"

"But..."

"To be so insolent to another nation's princess, a hero, at that. Inexcusable. You are aware that I have other sons," he stated with more intensity and an even heavier tone. The words rendered Prince Fabian silent.

"However..." King Rubens added after a moment, looking to all assembled in the chamber, "I see no proof of any potion that befuddled Princess Almelia."

"King Rubens, I thought you had just apologized for that wrongdoing, did you not?" King Randolph questioned, seeming distrustful.

King Rubens smiled, looking troubled. "You...must have misunderstood. That apology was for the coerced kiss. You can't suddenly expect me to believe in all this talk of love potions, now, can you?"

This man...

One look at Fabian's expression was all it took for me to realize that his father had masterminded this whole plot.

"Indeed, I think it is incredibly regretful that Fabian attempted to force a kiss. However, to say he tricked Princess Almelia into imbibing a potion and that you undid its effects? It all seems a little too far-fetched for me."

Angry, Almelia argued, "I can hardly remember what happened after we went to the café where I drank that juice—"

"Princess Almelia," King Rubens interjected curtly.

"...Wh-what is it?"

"I acknowledge the brutish behavior you were subjected to. Yet it hardly excuses striking another nation's prince for all to see." King Rubens dramatically shook his head. "Regrettably, this could become an international scandal between our two great countries."

"Uh...b-but that's—," Almelia stammered.

"Was it your intention to cause a war?" pressed King Rubens.

"B-but I never..."

Come on, Almelia. You've got to realize that this guy is all bark and no bite.

Even if the Holy Land of Rubens had Elvie on their side, they couldn't risk engaging in open warfare with Felind when their princess was *the* hero.

King Rubens was stringing everyone along, Almelia included.

The man's methods are admirable. I'll grant him that much, I thought.

"Both sides have suffered injury; a forced kiss and a slap to my fool son. With that, we are even. That leaves us with no more to discuss."

I had been expecting King Rubens to say something along those lines. He was quite adept at spinning situations to his benefit.

"Your Majesty, that's..."

Elvie had likely wanted to say this was absurd. Honest to a fault, that one.

"Elvie Elk Haydence, you are the daughter of a marquis and one of the members of the hero party that killed the demon lord. Am I correct?"

"Yes, you are."

"What I mean to say...is that I have great expectations of you in the future."

"...Yes, Your Majesty."

"It seems there is a great difference between what my son asserts and what this out-of-place guild employee claims. Who would you believe?"

"Well..."

Elvie lowered her head and looked at me. Not wishing her to draw her king's ire needlessly, I shook my head slightly.

Again, King Rubens pressed his offensive. "Her memories are hazy? You nullified the intoxication? There's no proof of such things, but as for the possibility those two are complicit in entrapping Fabian —"

"King Rubens," King Randolph, who had been listening silently, interjected. "I believe that what Almelia and Roland say is true. Moreover, I find the fact that you are trying to besmirch their honor unpardonable."

Although I'd urged her not to, Elvie spoke up. "Your Majesty, I believe the same. I do not think that Almelia or Roland are lying or attempting to falsely implicate His Highness. Roland was...very suspicious that Rubens was plotting something for the betrothal meeting. I believe you didn't realize that, showed your true colors, were caught, and have been dragged into the open."

Just as I expected, King Rubens gave Elvie a disgruntled glare. His own dog had bit his hand. Elvie's family, the Haydences, would likely be on the receiving end of some wretched punishment at this rate. On top of everything else, I now had to protect Almelia's honor and Elvie

herself. I would have preferred it if they could have held back the dramatics and ended this with a reconciliation.

“King Rubens.”

“What, guild grunt?”

“The Friday Purge.”

Everyone’s mouths gaped open.

Only King Rubens and I knew the phrase.

The Holy Land of Rubens was a dictatorship.

“Huh?!Why did you...you—? You couldn’t have!”

King Rubens’s chair clattered to the ground as he hastily stood. He shuddered in fear as he retreated upon realizing who I was.

Before the war with the demon lord, three cabinet ministers with a great deal of influence had refused to obey King Rubens’s orders. As such, he contracted me to kill them to garner unflinching loyalty. The first I made seem like a suicide; another appeared like a robbery gone wrong; and the last conveniently “disappeared.”

That was more or less the essence of the Friday Purge.

“You called me a liar, didn’t you?”

The interesting thing about King Rubens was he’d attempted to silence me. Dealing with all those people he sent after me proved to be a chore, so I’d faked my own death.

King Rubens must have felt like he was seeing a ghost. Unable to hide his distress, the man let out a dry laugh.

“Ha...ha...ha-ha-ha... I—I only suggested that you might have lied... P-please don’t do anything to me! You don’t believe I really think that, do you? I was just speaking of possibilities—possibilities and nothing more. Ha...ha-ha-ha...”

He had completely changed his tune.

“Almelia and Elvie are important to me. They are my precious companions. If anything happens to them in the future.....well, you are the *wise* King Rubens, aren’t you? I think you know best what will happen.”

“Uh.” His features froze, and his cheek twitched.

“If there’s a chance I might not be lying...then it’s possible that Fabian used a potion. Should word get out that a king resorted to such crude methods, it may cause their nation’s aristocracy to start asking

questions,” I said.

“As I have already made clear, my foolish son acted of his own accord.”

King Randolph remained sitting with his head propped in his hands, observing the other ruler. “King Rubens, I will tell you something.”

“...What is it?”

“A child’s blunders...are a parent’s responsibility.”

Audibly grinding his teeth, King Rubens’s face turned deep red. He got to his knees, slapped the ground with his hands, and slowly lowered his head. His voice quivered from rage and mortification as he said, “...Uh...I—I am...deeply sorry for Fabian’s actions and the crude way he has wronged your daughter Princess Almelia. If you could please find it in yourself to look the other way...!”

With a sharp glint in his eye, King Randolph looked down at the groveling man. He concealed a smile behind the palm of his hand.

“You have shown me how you feel, King Rubens. That is enough. We shall say you owe me one.”

“...”

“Should trouble arise in the future, I’m sure I can count on you for assistance.”

Still clenching his jaw tight, King Rubens scraped his nails along the floor and formed his hands into fists. “Yes... Of course...”

I see.

King Randolph chose not to resolve things here, but to keep this incident in his pocket as a bargaining chip for the future. Were the heads of other nations to learn of this blunder, trust in the Holy Land of Rubens would fall. Politics is a nasty game.

King Randolph whispered as though to himself.

“...Careless.”

“Hngh...!” King Rubens looked as though he wished to say something, but held his tongue.

“The festive mood has been spoiled. We shall be retiring.” Satisfied with concluding things there, King Randolph hastened everyone to leave, and we obeyed.

When we got back to the vacation house, King Randolph laughed.

“I never would have thought things would have ended up this way. What more could I ask of you, Roland? Calling you all the way

out here was worth it.” He slapped me on the back.

““Precious companions...””

Almelia and Elvie had complicated looks on their faces. Both had seemed happy about something for a while now.

“I never had a chance to mention it before, but, Roland, you helped me when I lost my memories, didn’t you? Thank you,” Almelia said.

“Please thank Reinora,” I replied.

Everyone on our side looked content with how things had played out. Then Almelia cocked her head to the side and inquired, “So, Roland? What’s the Friday Purge?”

“Oh right, what is that? It changed His Majesty’s attitude instantly. And this is King Rubens we’re talking about. I’ve never seen him so agitated before.”

I shrugged at Almelia and Elvie’s question. “Who knows?”



When King Rubens and those accompanying him departed the Somaleel coast to return home, King Randolph did not even see him off.

“Roland, where do you live these days? Are you eating well? Knowing you, I’m sure you’ll say that basic nutrition is all that’s required. Leaving my homeland to visit is difficult, but perhaps someday...”

Elvie’s farewell was incredibly long-winded. Her subordinates were yelling after her.

“C’mon, Elvie, they’re calling for you. Hurry and get going,” I urged.

“You’re always so blunt...! D-do you have a g-girl who’s caught your eye...?” she pressed.

“We don’t need to discuss that during a good-bye.”

Almelia laughed. “Oh, Elvie. You could just write him a letter.”

“Almelia... You might act calm now, but I bet you’ll be asking the same things when I’m gone,” Elvie said.

“Wh-what does that mean? It’s not like I’m planning on doing anything!” the princess fired back defensively.

“I’ll write to you. Roland, you have to answer. Expect a message every three days,” Elvie declared.

“That’s too much. Not that often. I could end up getting a new letter before the first one even made it to me.”

Blushing, Elvie walked right up to me and shoved my chest.

“You dummy!”

Then she turned her back and ran off, swiftly mounting the horse she'd been leading to catch up with her party.

Almelia waved as the other woman rode off toward home. After a beat, she turned to me. "So, Roland, where are you living right now?"

"Does it matter where?"

"Is it near that guild?"

"Does it matter?"

I wondered whether Rila was still sleeping. I'd set up a Gate so we could come back here right away just by using mana.

"Is your work going well? And why are you a guild employee anyway? Can I become an adventurer yet? How long until I can? Why don't you just join my guard already?"

I answered her rapid-fire questions with a single sigh.

"You're quite the talker. Get ready to go home. We're leaving soon."

Almelia blew a raspberry and puffed up her cheeks.

"What's with you? You could share some things about your private life with me, you know!"

"Little waif, a straightforward attack won't work on this man."

Rila had woken up at some point and popped up between Almelia and me.

The princess's eyes glittered with excitement. "Y-you're talking! It's a talking cat! Where did you come from, wittle kitty?"

"Ugh... So this one switches to baby talk when she speaks to animals. I understand why, but it's rather distasteful experiencing it firsthand..."

"What? Do you know Roland?"

"...In a way."

Almelia would never have guessed this was the demon lord.



“Listen here, waif. A good woman does not chase a man in so unprincipled a way. It’s better to have him pursue you.”

“Kitty, no...*teacher*...!”

“Mm-hmm. Yes, you would do well to address me as your instructor.”

Hero and demon lord were now chatting away. Peace really had come to the land.

“If a direct attack won’t work, then what should I do...?” Almelia asked.

“You’ve got to draw him in,” explained Rila.

“Of course...!”

Almelia listened intently to Rila’s lecture on romancing. I hardly thought she was qualified to teach the subject, considering her lack of experience.

“T-teacher, d-do you have any experience with d-dirty stuff...?”

“Oh-ho.”

“Whaa—?! You! That response?! D-details...give me details on what happens...!”

“Wait, wait. Do not be so hasty, virgin.”

Rila had done the same with Milia. Evidently, she felt superior to virgins. Unwilling to listen to a feline instructor’s perverted lesson, I headed out.



“I am thankful you humored me on this occasion. Please allow me a formal show of gratitude.”

Once I was alone in the room with King Randolph, he bowed his head to me.

“It was my own decision. Please don’t worry about it.”

There were two wide-mouthed glasses on the tabletop. In each were large pieces of ice and an expensive-looking amber liquor. King Randolph himself had prepared them. He hadn’t had a servant or maid do it because he wanted to convey his appreciation.

“So you say, but I disrupted the *normal life* or whatever it was you were seeking.”

“That’s what’s coming out of your mouth, but what’s going through your mind?” I pressed.

“I’m so happy that Almelia’s betrothal is off!” King Randolph admitted.

I broke into a smile without thinking.

“No, I jest. Well, that *is* the truth, but I really do regret inconveniencing you.”

"I understand. It's fine. King Rubens's presence concerned me from the get-go," I replied.

When I had taken on the assassination contract, the man struck me as the sort who would do whatever it took to fulfill his goal. And I'd been right. I was glad I'd come.

"It seems that Almelia has taken a liking to a difficult man," remarked King Randolph.

I picked up my glass and swished the ice cubes in it using only the movement of my wrist, making them clink.

"Undoubtedly, you've realized by now. You made that young lady Reinora fall for you in an evening and spill her secrets. There's no way you would be ignorant of the finer workings of a woman's emotions. Though you are a man of many hardships, there is no one greater than you." A strained smile made its way onto King Randolph's face as he tilted his glass. "Don't you think you've had enough of *normal*?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"You were both paid a reward for the slaying of the demon lord and owe a personal favor to the Felind Kingdom's own king."

I waited for King Randolph to continue.

"As Almelia's father and as your friend, I have a personal request. Please take my daughter's hand in marriage."

A friend... Right, I suppose King Randolph and I really are friends.

"King Randolph...I'm sorry."

"That is regrettable..." After letting out a deep sigh, King Randolph gulped down his drink. "It would be superb if you and Almelia had gotten together and had children... All I have are princesses... If only I had grandchildren..." The man glanced at me. "I would like to see the faces of my grandchildren..."

"Ha-ha. You lay it on thick."

"Well, it's fine. I suppose I'll just have to toil away to make my own successor."

He seemed to be joking, so I pulled some money from my pocket. It was a hundred thousand rins in total. "King Randolph, I think that your rule will end at fifty-seven."

"Hey, don't underestimate me, Roland. You think I've only got fifteen years left... Er, actually, when you say it, that sounds likely. Still, I expect I have until I'm sixty-five." King Randolph also set a hundred thousand rins on the table. "Whoever's closer is the winner."

"Sounds good to me."

After we grinned, we both drained our glasses.

"So, how does it feel to predict when you'll be decommissioned?" I asked.

"Oh, stop being fussy. You're the one who brought this up." King Randolph called in a servant and had them take detailed notes on the

bet.

“But, Your Majesty, if this is about your term ruling the country, wouldn’t you want to make it longer based on your age?”

“Guh, you, stop saying that! I was trying to outwit Roland...!”

I raised my pointer finger.

“We count one month from the last time you had sex. Any longer than that, and we treat you as impotent. Masturbation doesn’t count.”

“You don’t miss a beat, do you, Roland. Fine, that’s what we’ll go with.”

Thus, the wager was set.

The time had come to leave the Somaleel coast behind. We headed back to the Felind Kingdom.



Once I had parted ways with King Randolph and his entourage, I immediately used the Gate and returned to the Somaleel coast with Rila. As we walked the coastline, she smoothly interwove her fingers with mine.

“That Almelia...is she the hero?” asked Rila.

“Yes. What did you think of her?”

The woman furrowed her brow for a moment, contemplating.

“I’m not sure how to put this... She seemed like a straightforward type. A very good girl. I’m glad I did not have to battle her...”

“I’m happy to hear it.”

“Being called teacher wasn’t so bad, either... I even found myself thinking I’d like to be friends with her.”

Apparently, Rila had taken quite a liking to Almelia.

“I did find one thing to be rather curious. Why did you not turn down this request? I thought you were trying to put distance between yourself and Almelia and the king.”

That had been on my mind, too. Iris obviously wanted me to take the job, but the king himself had stated he wouldn’t have minded whether I accepted or not. I’d consented to the task without thinking about it very deeply.

“I care about those two, and I thought there could be some trouble with this engagement. Were that to occur, I trusted myself capable of resolving it. To me, the job part might have just been a formality. I wanted to help the king and princess because we know each other. Almelia and I are close, so I thought to lend a hand. She was

something like a pupil to me. That's all it was," I explained.

I couldn't tell Almelia or King Randolph this.

"So, even you have friends, I suppose? That is a good thing." Rila nodded, looking pleased. "Milia said that it's *normal* to have friends. After hearing what you've just said, I understand. You accepted this job for the sake of people close to you. I do not know why you were so worried, but I think that it's *normal* to do so."

"Worried? Me?"

"Mm-hmm. It seemed you were."

That notion had never once crossed my mind.

I thought that if I were *normal*, associating with the king and the princess would be odd, but I'd also wanted to help them. Logic and emotion had caused me some internal conflict.

"You have a long way to go if you are unable to realize even that much, knave." From her spot beside me, Rila chuckled.

Since the sun had set, I tried heading home, but Rila grew curiously petulant.

"...Knave, it seems you enjoyed last night."

"Hmm? It wasn't anything spectacular."

"Don't you say that! I mean the bed! The bed! I smelled the odor of another female!!!!" Rila turned her head away in a huff. "I am the demon lord. I am more magnanimous than any other. I do not care who you bequeath your seed to. Women cannot leave a man like you be. So, um...do you understand what I am trying to say?"

"...?"

She glanced at me and daintily pinched the tips of my fingers.

In the quiet sound of the waves, I heard her whisper quietly.

"...I...don't want to go home yet..."

Though it was dark, I could still see that Rila's face was red.

"Got it," I said; then she twirled around and clutched my chest.



Leaving Rila, I went to give my report to Iris. She must have realized she'd pushed a bit harder than usual, because she apologized several times.

"As a thank-you, what would you say to getting something to eat together?" The woman tucked her hair behind her ear and glanced at me.

“I’m sorry, I have plans.”

“Guh...! A-again with that...”

“And you don’t need to thank me.”

Having finished my business, I headed back to the Somaleel coast, where Rila was waiting, and spent the night with her.

5

Buddies

When I arrived at the guild on my next day of work, Milia called out to me when we saw each other, “Oh, Mr. Roland, how is your neck feeling?”

“My neck?”

I felt around my nape, but didn’t find anything wrong with it.

“You seem to have a mark there like something bit you...”

“...”

“Oh, was it your kitty? I see, I see. Does she bite you often?”

“...Yes. She just won’t leave me alone.”

That was careless.

I went to the restroom and checked myself in the mirror. I did have several marks that looked like bruises on my neck.

Milia was right. They are bites, and they did come from the cat, in a manner of speaking...

I pulled a few adhesive bandages from the first-aid box and put them on. I was hoping it would be enough to curtail any unnecessary suspicion.

Iris finished her morning meeting, and we all settled into our regular duties.

“Miss Milia, do you have friends?” I inquired.

“Why are you suddenly asking me that?” she responded, confused at the implication.

“I don’t mean it like that... If you have a friend...then you care for them deeply, right? If that’s the case, is it *normal* to want to do something for them?”

Milia blinked, seemingly spellbound.

“Why are you asking about something that’s a given? Anyone would feel that way. It’s perfectly natural.”

“Glad to hear it.”

King Randolph and I had always had a good rapport. I’d also gotten to know Almelia several years ago, and we’d spent some quality time together. Perhaps they weren’t friends exactly, but I did care about them. Thankfully, it was typical for me to want to help them when they were in trouble.

I'd unknowingly stumbled closer to a *normal life*.

"Oh, Mr. Rolaaand, there's an adventurer here."

While I was occupied being rather pleased with myself, Milia brought me back to reality.

I was sure I didn't have front-desk duties today. Milia was pointing at a seat at the end of the counter that was labeled "Roland Box."

"...Oh? What is this?"

"Since you're requested so often, we decided yesterday to make a seat specifically for you."

The spot at reception quite literally had my name on it. On the opposite side of the counter stood a young adventurer. He was Neal's mentee. I remembered his face. When I sat down, he whipped his head up.

"Boss, I'm looking forward to working with you today!" he eagerly exclaimed.

"You don't have to greet me like that. Please have a seat."

"Excuse me!" he said energetically before plopping down in the chair.

I took his adventurer papers and checked his name again.

Roger Greez, twenty years old. Currently at rank D.

"Not putting your feet up on the counter today, I see," I joked, which brought a strained smile to Roger's face.

"I don't do that anymore."

Roger told me he'd been questing with Neal a few times now. Neal was getting on in years, but he was very obedient and took my advice seriously. Possibly because of that, he'd grown stronger and confident, managing to reach rank B.

"I'd like to ask for a quest that fits me to a T," said Roger.

"Understood. A few moments, please," I replied.

Neal won't be going with him on this excursion. A job that fits the D-rank adventurer Roger's skill to a T...

"What would you think of this?" I brought out the quest stub and put it on the counter. "Simply put, the Kouvilla district needs someone to devise a flood-control plan."

"If that's what you want me to do...boss..." The young man looked slightly disappointed.

"Your skill, Doppels, should be perfect for this."

Roger's skill was rare and allowed him to make physical replicas of himself. I thought he would be a great help for a quest that demanded a lot of manpower, but he looked wholly unenthused.

"Is something wrong? Does this have something to do with Neal's absence?"

Roger nodded.

“At first, I was thrilled ’cause my skill is so useful. Neal’s an archer, so things go a lot more smoothly with someone acting as a decoy. But I started to feel less and less satisfied with the role I was playing...”

Roger had been happy initially simply because the quests had gone well. He had been able to drink, eat, and hire women with the money he earned. However, as he became used to the work, he started developing individually.

“That’s why we decided to go solo for a bit.”

In short, Roger had started to feel dissatisfied with his treatment. It was a common reason that parties broke up.

“I see. In that case, why don’t you try to strike out on your own? I think you’ve reached that point,” I said.

“Do you really think so...?”

“Are you worried about handling things alone?”

“Not really... I’ve done so a few times in the past...,” Roger answered, starting to trail off toward the end.

“I don’t do this a lot, but...,” I began and flipped through the stack of stubs. “I’ll show you a quest above your ranking.”

“Huh? Are you sure?”

“You’re allowed to report on completing a quest you hadn’t known was available. For example, if you unwittingly slay a creature the guild wanted dead, you could bring proof to the office, and we’ll treat it as if you had taken the job.” I took back the flood-control slip and pulled out a different one. “Rank B. It’s to slay a Hell Hound.”

“A B-rank slaying quest?”

“This one’s above your level, but if you fail, it won’t reflect poorly on you. All the blame will be placed on the guild employee who told you about it. Even so, this will be very tough. What do you say?”

“...I’ll do it! You think I can handle it, right, boss?! I won’t let you down!”

Roger’s gloomy attitude from earlier did an about-face. Suddenly, he was brimming with motivation. I gave him several pieces of advice for the Hell Hound.

“I see... You’re right... Uh-huh.....,” the young man muttered to himself.

He seemed conflicted. This wasn’t a foe he could defeat without his skill. Yet if he used it and kept his cool, then he’d doubtlessly succeed.

“Taking on an enemy that outranks you is sure to be difficult. Make use of everything at your disposal,” I cautioned.

“...Got it.” His task clear, Roger left the guild looking determined.

A female adventurer waiting behind him took the seat in front of me. “Um, there are a few things I was hoping to ask you,” she started.

“I’m sorry, would it be possible to do this at a later time?” I stood up and left the guild.

Neal was standing around outside the building. I had seen him peeking in the window several times.

“Boss! Hope things are going well!” he greeted me as I approached him.

“If you were worried, why didn’t you just tell him?” I ignored his pleasantries and went straight to the point. “Truthfully, I also get envious of people with rare and powerful skills sometimes,” I admitted.

Neal silently cast his eyes down. It looked like I’d hit the mark.

“As Roger gets stronger, so will his doppelgängers. So long as he works hard, his skill will become incredible.”

Neal only had Farsight. The skill was perfectly suited to archery because it granted the user long-distance vision, but it was nothing compared to Doppels.

“Your protégé is coming into his own. If you team up with him again...make sure you treat him as an equal rather than as your junior,” I instructed.

Though Roger had been complaining that Neal was using him, in actuality, he did want to keep working with the other man rather than going solo. That was why he had been conflicted.

“Boss, I...might’ve actually been envious of the guy... I ignored him because I had a higher rank and more experience...”

“He went to slay a Hell Hound for a B-rank quest.”

“Huh? But he’s in rank D, boss.”

“I thought he could handle it. But there is a small chance things could go wrong.”

“Uh.”

Neal picked up the bow he had left propped against the building and ran in the direction that Roger had gone. As he hurried off, I told him the general place Roger would be.

The sight reminded me of when I’d slain the demon lord at the demon lord’s castle. Had my allies known I’d set out to slay the demon lord alone, they would have run after me like Neal was now.

I headed back to the reception desk, arranged quests for the adventurers who had come, and conducted tests until closing time. Right as I was about to lock the front door, I heard something collapse outside.

I peeked out and found Neal and Roger on the ground.

Wheeze, haah, they panted. I greeted them.

“Thank you for working so late.”

It seemed Neal had been supporting Roger.

“Boss...I defeated the Hell Hound...! Here...?”

He offered me a giant, slightly yellowed claw that was still red with blood at the base. I handed it over to the inspector, who was inside cleaning up.

“We’ll have it analyzed, so please wait a moment... Still, it looks like you really took a beating. Did you have a tough time?”

“Yes...right when things were taking a turn for the worse, Neal helped me out...”

The pair, who seemed to be having a hard time even moving, entrusted their backs to the guild’s stone steps.

Neal laughed as he patted Roger’s shoulder.

“Looks like we’re not gonna go drinking like this.”

“Actually, I feel like I won’t be moving for a while...”

The inspector gave us the okay.

“You’ve cleared the quest. Congratulations,” I said.

““Thank you,”” they both replied.

“Ahh, that was a pain...,” Neal groaned.

“It really was pretty close...,” Roger replied.

“But we’re alive.”

“You got that right.”

After that exchange, the two exhausted and bruised men laughed loudly.

I gave them a light farewell and closed the door.

Doubtless, they had a lot to discuss. Still lying on the ground, the pair began to chat. I couldn’t make out about what. However, when they came for their next quest, I could tell they would be coming by together.

Girls' Gathering

“Hrmmm...”

Milia stared at Roland's back since he was on front-desk duty.

“There are more of them...! More female adventurers...”

When she thought back on it, there had been at least three (all at marriageable ages) who had requested Roland's assistance yesterday.

This morning was no different. Another young woman had already arrived and was waiting for him.

Milia had strained her ears to listen to these women talk with Roland a few times. It seemed they came by simply to have words rather than get a quest. They would blab away to him about this and that; then when the conversation would finally wrap around to the actual job, they would give excuses and leave without accepting.

Whenever another employee tried to assist one of those girls while they were waiting for Roland, they always made it clear they were okay with waiting. Then they would sit on a nearby bench until he was free.

Milia had even watched as a shy mage quietly passed Roland a letter.

“This is a crisis...”

Something very pent-up was building inside her.

With her work done, Milia invited Iris over to a gloomily lit market street, where they each purchased a bottle of alcohol.

Then they headed to a house on the outskirts of town.

“Good evening?” Rila, looking dubious, came to greet them. “Oh, it's just the waif and Iris. You may enter.”

“Pardon the intrusion,” Iris said.

Rila brought the two guests to the living room, and they placed the booze on the table.

“Milia, what's going on today? Why did you bring me all the way here?” asked Iris, still not clear what was going on.

“How can you not know, Branch Manager?! This is a dire situation! It's an emergency!”

“Such an agitated young thing,” Rila remarked, seeming irked, as

she sat on the sofa across from them. She had prepared cups, so the trio started drinking.

“Perhaps you’re unaware, but Mr. Roland has started to become popular lately,” Milia revealed.

Iris’s and Rila’s eyes went wide, then they burst out into laughter, unable to hold it in.

“Bwah-ha...pfft-ha-ha-ha-ha! Of all the things you could have said!” Rila said through bouts of giggling.

“This isn’t a laughing matter. Aren’t you worried about it, Miss Prima Donna? Tons of women are visiting Mr. Roland.”

Rila crossed her legs and ran her fingers through her long, silky red hair. The alluring way she did so captivated Milia slightly.

“Not in particular. I am not one to worry in such a manner. And there are few who could compare to my looks.”

“Wha...? How can you be soooo conceited...?!” Milia was frustrated, but had to concede that it was true. Now that Rila had stated as much, she really did seem steeped in confidence from the tips of her toes to the ends of her hair.

“Branch Manager, she’s so sure of herself, she’s not willing to cooperate at all!”

“Look...it’s not like there’s anything to be done, now, is there?” Iris questioned.

“I suppose not...,” mumbled Milia.

Iris looked exasperated as she brought her glass to her mouth.

“Is this supposed to be what maturity is? I’m on to you, okay? I know that you’ve taken a liking to Mr. Roland, Branch Manager,” Milia said.

Iris coughed slightly before replying. “...I won’t deny it at this point. But just think about it. He’s incredibly competent at his job, likable, handsome, and also has a mysterious side...”

Milia excitedly slapped her own knee. “Y-yes! That’s right! You do get it then, Branch Manager?”

“It’s no wonder that there are tons of girls like you who have caught on to that, now, is it?” Iris posited.

“Ugh...I—I guess so.” Milia stared at the wine in her glass, grumbling.

Suddenly, Rila blurted out, “...You forgot kind. He has a very thoughtful personality...”

Milia and Iris turned to look at Rila, who suddenly averted her gaze.

“...Miss Prima Donna, I’m not sure how to put this, but it’s kind of unfair how cute you can be.”

“You’re so full of yourself, but then you suddenly become bashful,” Iris appended.

“Oh, s-stop that.”

Rila took another sip from her glass.

Since they didn't have anything to eat, the three of them headed to the kitchen.

“He...is quite late...”

“Rila, are you worried about him?” asked Milia.

“O-of course not. I only thought he might still be working while the two of you shirk your responsibilities here.”

“You're always saying stuff like that, but your true feelings are obvious.” Milia moved to stroke Rila's head, but the latter batted it away.

“That is disrespectful. Do you even know who I am?”

“Does it matter?” Milia latched on to Rila from behind. “You have such a perfect face...and your breasts...they're so much bigger than mine...”

“Me? Perfect?! I *am*! Kneel before me, virgin!”

“Unlike you, I have something called integrity.”

There came a sound from the front door.

“He seems to have returned,” Rila remarked.

All three women perked up.

“I shall welcome him home. Do not get in my way, waif,” declared Rila.

“You always get to. I'm going to do it today,” Milia countered.

“Why, you little—!”

“What is wrong with you?”

While the pair were occupied, Iris slipped past them and headed to the front door. “Welcome home. You're late,” she said to Roland.

“...Huh? What's going on today?” he asked.

“We had some things we needed to get off our chest, woman to woman.”

“Is that right?” Roland responded quietly as he peered into the kitchen. “And even Miss Milia is here. Good work today.”

“Same to you! Would you like me to whip something up?” Milia offered eagerly.

“Thank you. But I'm fine,” Roland answered with a smile, and Milia's heart skipped a beat.

“Knave.”

“What is it?”

“You have the maiden in a tizzy.”

“H-hey, what do you think you're saying?!”

Despite Milia's protests, Rila was correct. The guild employee truly had no idea what to do.

The three women ate the snacks Milia had made and talked about this and that as they drank. Roland even joined in. Iris acted just as

she usually did, but Rila grinned over at her more than usual.

At some point during the night, Milia finally posed the question to Rila. "Don't you ever feel jealous? Don't you ever just want it to stop? Like when Iris and I are getting to know Mr. Roland?"

"It's not as though I do not feel that way, but as you know, he is a good man. No one can stop females from flocking to him. Even if I were to get you away from him, others would come for him anyway." Such was the explanation Rila gave.

Milia realized how petty she had been upon hearing that. "I think I'll be leaving soon. Thank you for having me," she stated politely.

"It's late, so I'll take you back. Rila, don't overdrink," Roland said.

"I know. Make sure to take her all the way home, knave."

Rila waved good-bye, and Milia returned the gesture.

"I don't live that far. I can get back on my own fine," Milia asserted.

"No. It's relatively safe here, but it's dangerous for a girl to walk alone at night. Let's go," Roland replied, leading the way.

Milia felt like this was the first time they'd been alone in a long while—since she had invited him to her house for dinner. The young woman had no idea what to talk about and ended up keeping silent the whole time. Roland also was always a man of few words, so they were both quiet.

In the moonlight, their path wasn't particularly dim. If it had been slightly darker, Milia had planned on quietly taking his hand, but when she considered the possibility someone would see, she couldn't find the courage to do so.

Unfortunately, her house came into view before long.

She wanted to lay bare all the feelings in her heart, but she had lost the words. After Roland accompanied her to the front door, she gave a small bow, bid him good night, and turned to enter.

From somewhere in Milia's mind, Rila seemed to tease her for the cowardice.

"So, um—M-Mr. Roland."

"...Yes?"

Milia had succeeded in stopping him, but she had no idea what to say.

Her lips were dry. She swallowed. Her knees quivered. Her heartbeat, which seemed so much louder than usual, thumped in her ears.

Suddenly, a scene from a romance novel she had recently read came to her mind. She picked out a particular line the heroine had said to her beloved as they parted ways.

"Uh, um, tomorrow will be clear, won't it?"

Roland looked up at the sky and nodded. "It would be nice if it

were.”

“G-good night! I’ll see you tomorrow! At the guild?”

After he bowed, Roland left.

Milia went inside, turned her back to the door, and sank to the ground. “Ahhh...”

In the book, the line had been a confession of the heroine’s feelings. It was an incredibly indirect method of admission, however, so it hadn’t gotten the point across at all.

Milia still was far from having the courage to articulate her affection clearly.

7

To a Proctor Seminar, Part I

Iris placed a single sheet of paper on top of her desk in the branch manager's office.

"We used to have every test proctor attend each year, but this time it'll just be you, Roland. Is that okay?"

"What's this?"

"It's information about the proctor seminar held in the royal capital every year. The guild employees who oversee the adventurer exams gather from the different lands and check in on the plan from headquarters, have lectures, that sort of thing."

The idea was to improve the proctors to create better adventurers.

Last year, several from our branch, including Maurey, had gone. However, I recently had become the only test supervisor, so I would be making the trip alone.

"It's not going to be anything that difficult, so just enjoy yourself in the capital," Iris told me, then instructed me to prepare.

A bored-looking Rila came along with me.

"Hmm. Humans are so fussy."

While in her cat form, she read over the seminar guide in my pack.

"It's sensible to make sure the people down the chain execute their policies," I responded.

Even securing a minimum level of competency was significant enough to justify the event.

Rila yawned. "Well, it hardly matters to me. Let's finish this quickly and have a tasty bite to eat at the capital."

We'd gone there just once after I'd reported the demon lord's slaying, but our stay had been brief.

"This isn't a vacation, but I guess that's fine."

The convention was a two-day affair. According to the agenda, there would be enough time to wander around.

"I expected they'd only fix us up with cheap lodgings, but it seems I was incorrect," Rila remarked as she browsed the pages of the seminar pamphlet.

“Yeah, the Adventurers Guild has a nice place,” I answered.

“Then I look forward to it...”

Now that I thought about it, this might have been the first time we took something of a trip together.

“I do wonder what a city of a human nation will be like.”

“It’s nothing noteworthy.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. I shall do as I please while you are hard at work.”



After a short while on horseback, I caught sight of the steep walls of the capital. We crossed the drawbridge over the moat. I showed the gatekeepers my invitation, they informed me of the rules I would have to follow, and I went in.

“They gave you quite the warning.”

“Yes. It seems that some demons are still after Princess Almelia. Apparently, they launched some sort of mental attack.”

“...Really? Hmm. I suppose that’d set anyone on guard...” Rila glanced at me several times.

“Is something wrong?” I inquired.

“No, not at all.” This time, she snickered to herself.

“?”

She didn’t seem likely to explain her behavior, so I headed straight to the stables and left my horse there. Then I sought out the inn the guild had reserved.

After I explained to the proprietor what I was there for, I was led to a room.

Rila had told me she would take a stroll around town, so I reverted her to her humanoid form.

“According to that schedule, you won’t be available until dinner, will you, knave?”

“It looks like it.”

“I shall find an establishment, then. And I shall have my fill of fun there.” Rila flipped her silky hair, making a big show of it, then left.

I left my things in the room and headed to the Adventurers Guild headquarters.

While I’d seen the solemn wooden structure several times, this would be my first time entering it.

A guide led me down the hall into a large conference room. It was already filled with over a hundred guild employees—others who were here for the seminar.

I took a seat at random and was handed a sheet that detailed the

convention topics and names of the lectures. There were two primary subjects: magic and adventurer knowledge.

“Take a look at this. The speaker, Samuel, is the grand magic master’s disciple.”

“Grand magic master? You mean Geelman? The one who unified the mage troops of the allied forces?”

When my ears caught that nostalgic name, I couldn’t help but let my mind drift to those days.

Samuel, the seminar lecturer, entered. He looked like he was in his thirties, and he had a bald spot at the top of his head.

“Thank you all for coming. I am Samuel, the one tasked with leading this magic workshop. It’s not often that I teach guild employees, so please listen carefully. If anything comes up, please raise your hand to speak,” he said, talking a big game, but then he dived into the most basic lesson.

When I looked around, most of the employees were earnestly taking notes.

“Hey. You seem to be letting your mind wander. Shouldn’t you be paying closer attention and writing things down?” the woman next to me asked.

“I do best listening and memorizing.”

“What? That’s amazing...”

What’s more, studying such rudimentary concepts was worthless to me. Many employees had no experience with magic, so they were listening fervently and scribbling down all they could.

“Try to actually draw this magic circle and test it out yourself.”

Samuel drew the magic circle of Flame, a type of spell, on the blackboard in front of us.

I’d learned from Rila that drawing magic circles was a fundamental part of magic.

There were slight differences between the magic circles of the demon race and human race, but as far as I understood from her lectures, the theory was the same.

“Flame.”

Samuel placed his hand on the magic circle he had drawn, channeled mana through it, and a flame just large enough to hold in his palm flared up, then immediately went out.

“““““Whoa...”””””

Everyone seemed impressed.

I noticed something right away, so I raised my hand.

“Yes, you there. What is it?”

“Don’t you think the conversion efficiency of the mana would be low with that magic circle hindering your output?”

“Hmph. It seems we have an amateur mage in the audience. This magic circle is the most appropriate way of casting this spell. It always has been. You think it has a bad conversion efficiency? That it won’t get much output? Please refrain from making up your own terminology.”

I guess that’s just how it is.

The differences between human and demon magic had reared its head. According to Rila, her kind constantly strove to improve their methods.

But what about humanity?

A man like Samuel, who carried stagnant ideas, had been charged with instructing other teachers. Without a hunger for knowledge, new systems would never be born.

Respecting what had come before wasn’t improper, but adhering to old methods wasn’t enough to make one strive for improvement.

I headed to the front and redrew the Flame magic circle.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing?”

“How does this look?” I asked the audience.

“...The one that guy drew looks way simpler,” one guild staffer said.

“That might be easier to memorize,” another agreed.

Samuel laughed mockingly.

Not minding him, I explained the circle. “A magic circle is a system. By adding even a single line, you create latency in how quickly the spell activates. Basically, you can create a spell that’s roundabout or one that activates via the simplest path possible. The question is, which one is better?”

All in attendance quietly listened to me.

“Thank you for your astute observation. Certainly, what you have drawn is a magic circle that uses Flame as its base...but there’s no point to your interruption since your array can’t be invoked,” Samuel mocked.

Rila had told me not to just memorize the magic circles, but to understand the theory behind them. She had said not to focus on the superficial layer before me, but to focus on the basis of the spell. By doing so, one could create their own magic with only the slightest notion. She was much better at teaching than I had first thought.

“I’m going to invoke it. This is how the demon lord does it,” I

stated.

“Huh?”

It was magical theory the likes of which humans had never known before.

I placed my hand on the circle I had drawn and sent some mana through it.

Fwoosh. A small flame immediately appeared.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! You call that magic? The best you could do is roast a pig over that thin—”

ROOOOOAR!

A gigantic blaze surged out from the magic circle.

“Ahhhhh?!”

Samuel fell onto his backside.

The fire was gone after an instant, but the guild workers were flooded.

“Wh-what was that just now??”

“Was that Flame...?”

“As a former adventurer, I can confirm it... That thing’s power was way past the level of Flame.”

“The magic circle was a little different, but it was still the one for Flame, though...”

From his spot on the ground, Samuel lowered his eyes, unable to accept what was happening. “Wh-who are you?” he demanded.

“Who are you?” I shot back.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m well acquainted with Geelman. He doesn’t take disciples.”

“...Uh.”

“I suppose a mage who claims to be Geelman’s student would never have to worry for work.”

Samuel made a strange groaning sound as he avoided looking at me.

After returning to my seat, I said, “I apologize for interrupting. Please continue.”

Samuel cleared his throat loudly and went back to his lecture.

“Psst, could you show me that thing you did earlier one more time?” the woman next to me quietly asked. It seemed she was more interested in me than the lecture. Someone else sitting nearby requested the same.



Though we were in the middle of a class, twenty people had gathered around me, so I started to explain the theory behind magic circles and conversion efficiency to them again.

"When I saw that thing you did there, it was a breath of fresh air."

"I know the feeling. That Samuel really underestimates us."

"Right? That lecturer's got his nose stuck up because of his position. I get it now."

They looked smug, like some miscreants who had gotten away with a prank as they snickered together.

Samuel had ended up teaching a lecture no one was listening to, but his attitude had changed entirely. He spoke in a quiet, demure voice.

"Were you an adventurer? Or a mage or something?" someone asked me.

"No, if he were just a mage, he wouldn't be trying to improve on magic. He'd just learn new spells, I think," another responded.

"Which means you're from the capital's research facility?" a third concluded.

I smiled meekly and waved my hand. "Not at all. My work isn't anything so important. Also, we're still in the middle of a lesson, so I think we ought to keep listening..." I said, but Samuel had already left the hall.

He might have had trouble performing in front of me.

He had left a lot of open time compared to what was scheduled, though. Since the lecture was over anyway, the guild workers around me had started introducing themselves to one another. They also had me introduce myself.

I didn't understand the point of it, since we were leaving each other the next day. Internally, I couldn't help but feel puzzled.

"I heard earlier that this Samuel guy's apparently some aristocrat's retainer mage," a short-haired man—Roy—claimed.

"And that's why he's got such a huge ego," a bubbly woman named Nina added, looking displeased.

"Even though he's not a noble himself. Most of the retainers are like that, though," Sheela, the woman who'd been sitting beside me, appended.

"Um, what is a retainer in this case?" I inquired.

"You don't know? They're kind of like private soldiers that only answer to the aristocrats. They'll make them tutor their kids and be bodyguards. It's one of the ways adventurers like to retire," Nina explained.

Lord Bardel, who had bought Maylee as a slave, might have had his own retainers as well.

"In which case...aren't you kind of in trouble?" Roy asked.

“Why would I be?” I questioned, and the man furrowed his eyebrows.

“There was another guild employee who challenged an aristocrat once. Someone who started work around the same time as me. Supposedly, the guy got on the bad side of an aristocrat and was pressured into quitting.”

I trusted myself to be fine.

What I’d had with Lord Bardel was a business transaction. However, I *had* sent his knights flying.

“Argan, are you going to be okay...?” Nina inquired.

“I’m not sure. I don’t think I did anything wrong, though. Samuel was the one who said to raise our hands if we had something to say.”

“““Oh no, no, no.”””

All three of them shook their heads and their hands. I must have said something off base.

“He did, but nobles have a way of twisting things based on their mood,” Sheela said, concerned.

Right around then, a large, muscular man entered. He had a longsword at his hip.

“It seems there is a guild employee here among you who interrupted the lecture and made a mockery of Sir Samuel?”

Everyone went silent when the tough’s loud voice echoed through the lecture room.

He was probably a knight without his armor on.

“That’s got to be one of the aristocrat’s guards...”

“Is he mad because we didn’t listen to the lesson?”

The man drew his longsword with the scabbard still around the blade and thumped it down right in front of him, placing his hands on the pommel.

“Yes, I believe you mean me.” I stood from my seat, but Roy was pulling on my clothes.

“Heeey! No one was planning to sell you out, Argan. Normal people would keep quiet about this.”

I had to wonder if that was true. Perhaps I’d been careless. Unfortunately, it was too late to take back what I’d revealed.

“I don’t want to cause any more trouble,” I said to Roy and the others.

“You scoundrel! Get over here!” the brutish man demanded with such intensity that the guild workers around him recoiled. As instructed, I approached.

He was a large sort, over six and a half feet tall, forcing me to crane my neck to meet his gaze. There were several scars on his face and over his mouth. He had battle experience and seemed to do a lot of regular training.

There was a chance he was a mercenary or an adventurer. Still, based on the information from earlier, I could probably assume he was employed by the same aristocrat as Samuel.

“Your affiliation! Tell me!” the large man insisted.

“Isn’t it only polite to introduce yourself first?” I responded.

“Not to the likes of you.”

“I could say the same.”

A stir ran through the room.

“Wh-why would you say something that’ll rub him the wrong way on purpose...?”

“Is that guild employee trying to get himself killed...?!”

A vein began to throb on the knight’s forehead.

“A knight should uphold honor and common manners, I think,” I quipped.

“I only choose to humor those who I judge to demonstrate such qualities themselves,” the man replied.

It seemed like a cheap form of chivalry.

With a shout, the knight hurled a thick fist at me with full force.

He’s slow...

It’d be no trouble at all to easily dodge him. Doubtless, this brute was here to avenge Samuel after the insult I had dealt him. He wouldn’t be satisfied if his strike missed.

The attack was so slow that I had plenty of time to consider what to do.

All right, I’ll let him hit me.

It was the most efficient and practical solution.

“Ngaaaaaaah?”

The only impressive thing was his yell as his fist hit my face. Right at the moment of collision, I lightly jumped back. This was the best way to escape from the impact. On top of that, it enabled me to give a dramatic show of flying away from the hit. From the knight’s perspective, there could have been nothing more satisfying.

“Ngaaah?”

I turned my neck to soften the power behind his fist, leaving me practically unharmed. I could have caught myself by putting my hand on the ground and doing a somersault to break my fall, but that wouldn’t have been appeasing enough. Thus, I made sure to give a big show out of tumbling along the ground as I broke my fall.

It didn’t hurt at all.

“Argan, are you all right?!”

Everyone looked on with concern. When I glanced at the man, he

seemed puzzled for a moment. I'd been blown away in a pretty spectacular show, but he hadn't felt any resistance.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. If you'd just told me your name obedient-like, I could've just let you off with a little warning, you fool!" In a triumphant display, he put his hand on his hip and looked very pleased.

I also pretended to be in pain. "...It hurts..."

"Wait, Argan, didn't you get hit on the other side of your face?"

"...It hurts..."

"He corrected himself..."

Oh!

This aura!

I felt mana that I knew well coming from outside.

Crack!

All the windows shattered, and someone screamed.

"Wh-what?"

"The glass just broke for no reason?!"

The presence was unmistakable and very angry. This was bad.

Almelia appeared from below the windowsill.

"You...hit Roland..."

Rila's head popped up from behind the princess. In a futile effort, she tried to placate the other woman. "You can tell just by looking he was faking! There's no need to be so incensed!"

Why are those two together? And here, of all places...

This was hardly the time to mull over such things, however.

"...I will not allow this. You hit Roland and sent him flying," Almelia muttered.

"Stop. Have you no patience, waif?" Rila again tugged on the princess, but she was shrugged off.

Almelia burst in with the fury of a storm.

"It's the hero," the large man observed before kneeling and lowering his head. "Your Highness, Almelia! This is my first time meeting you. I am so—"

"Hey! This isn't the time for exchanging pleasantries. You've got to run!" I cried.

"Huh? Of all things you'd try to—"

Thud, thud, thud, thud. Almelia ran into the room with short steps. She did this because she wouldn't have been able to make the sharp turns with her normal strides. It was a practice that worked best

indoors. Evidently, Almelia was still putting my teachings to use.

Wait, this is hardly the time to admire her footwork.

Almelia grabbed the lapels of the giant man as he was kneeling and threw his back into the wall.

BAAAM!

Then, looking absolutely ferocious, Almelia thrust her fist straight through the wall.

“Y-yeeeeek?!” The large man wet himself.

“Apologize. To Roland. Right now. Next time, I won’t miss your face.”

“I...I’m sorr... I am incredibly soooooorry?”

The knight bowed his head into the puddle he had created. To protect the man, I inserted myself between him and Almelia.

“You’ll die if you stay here. Leave the rest to me and flee.”

“Th-th-thank you...”

The large brute, streaming with cold sweat, tears, snot, and all kinds of things, seemed unable to even stand. He crawled away.

In his hurry, he forgot his longsword, but that wasn’t my problem.

“Nggghhhh.” Red in the face, Almelia was trying to pull her fist out of the wall.

The guild staffers beheld the spectacle in a daze.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I asked.

“Can’t you tell? I’m trying to pry myself out. My fist is stuck.”

“That’s not what I mean. This is a meeting for guild employees, and on top of that, it’s a proctor seminar for Adventurers Guild tests. For a princess, you seem to have a lot of time on your hands.”

Rila was conspicuously absent.

Where’s she gone off to?

“You’ve said quite enough.” As Almelia spoke, she tried in vain to free her fist. “Rileyla is your friend, isn’t she? So I asked her where you were, and she brought me over here.”

Come to think of it, the last time they had met, Rila had been in her black-cat teacher form.

I let out a sigh.

There was supposed to be another lecture on adventurer knowledge, but Almelia’s outburst had likely put an end to that. According to her, she’d actually come by because she had some business with me. I led Almelia outside the lecture room.

“What do you need?” I asked.

“You’ll be, um, eating alone for dinner, right? I guess that means I’ll have no choice but to eat with you. Want to come over?”

Fidget, glance. Fidget, fidget, glance, glance.

Almelia couldn't hold still. This was how she usually acted around me. I didn't know whether to call her haughty or arrogant. Whatever this phase was, it didn't seem like she'd ever grow out of it.

"You couldn't have possibly come all this way just to say that?" I questioned.

"N-no! It-It's just that I happened to pass by, and then you were being punched."

"..."

Hadn't she just said she'd come here after asking Rila where I was?

"Wh-why are you staring at me all suspiciously like that? I-I saved you, you know?"

Almelia blew a raspberry and puffed up her cheeks.

"I taught you never to lose your temper, didn't I? Well, enough. I suppose you did all that out of concern for me. I thank you for that, at the very least."

"What's with you? Can't you just be straightforward for once?" Almelia asked.

You're the one who's never direct.

Regardless, Almelia really needed to leave. Her presence was incredibly distracting, to say the least.

"When does the seminar end?" she inquired.

"Does it matter?"

Was she planning to find me after?

"I didn't come to the capital for fun. This is work. You'd interfere with that. Go back to the castle."

"Y-you don't have to be so cold to me! Fine, you dummy. See you later."

Angered, Almelia stomped off.

Time passed, and the next lecturer arrived, so I returned to the meeting room.

◆ Rila ◆

Immediately parting ways with Roland, Rila had gone for a walk in the capital.

"This human city seems quite satisfactory. It's busy and has many different kinds of sustenance."

As she strolled, Rila partook of the sights the market had to offer.

Although possessed of uniquely demonic red hair, Rila did not draw too much attention. There were all sorts of nonhuman creatures in the world, after all, including elves and dwarves.

Her nose caught the scent of roasting meat, and she wandered about until arriving at a shop that served meat skewers.

“Peddler, give me two! Two!”

“Coming right up!” The shop owner, who had rolled up his sleeves, cut a thick slice from a hunk of meat, drizzled it with sauce, and skewered it on a stick.

Right at the same time, an eerie hooded figure quickly passed by. Though she no longer had her mana or any magic to speak of, Rila still possessed other abilities that outstripped others, such as her kinetic vision and reflexes.

They were moving quickly, weaving through the crowd. Occasionally, they stopped, but then would start dashing along again.

“Now, what could that be?” Rila mused.

“Thanks for waiting, miss!”

“Hmm?”

Rila tried to pull her change purse from her pocket. She patted herself down.

“...? Hmm? My purse...my purse...”

“Miss, what’s the matter? You don’t mean to say...”

“It’s missing...! D-did I drop it...?!”

“Didja get pickpocketed?”

“Wh-why...?! Where could it have gone?!”

The gift that Roland had bought her, the cat-shaped pouch, was gone.

“Y-you little burglar...! You stole my purse, a present from Roland, no less...! U-unforgivable! And I loved it so! Unforgivable...”

“Miss...I sympathize, I do, but I can’t give stuff out for free,” the shopkeeper said.

“Grrr... I-if I tell Roland—”

The hooded figure who had been moving quickly suddenly stopped in their tracks.

Then they scrambled.

They were coming toward Rila now.

“Did you just say Roland...?” the concealed figure inquired.

“Oh, you’re...”

When she glanced into the hood, Rila found the face of a sweet girl. It was that hero she had met at the resort the other day.

“I’m Roland’s love—I mean, his acquaintance. So he really did

come to the capital then! Where is he?"

"Th-theres something more important I must implore of you. I have the request of a lifetime..."

"What is it?"

"C-could you pay the man...?"

After considering it for a moment, the hero nodded. "All right. In exchange, lead me to Roland. I heard he came here for work, but I have no idea where he could be."

"Mm-hmm. Leave it to me." Rila stuck out her chest.

The hero pulled back her hood slightly to show her face to the shopkeeper.

"Oh whoaaaaa! Princ—"

"Shh! Shh! I snuck out. So please come to the castle later, and I'll pay you."

"I-I-I could never do something so absurd. If this one here is your friend, then forget the bill..."

"Thanks."

Huh? Rila thought as she watched the exchange. "You must be quite something here," she remarked.

"Ha-ha. You could say that."

◆ Roland ◆

"And that's what happened," Rila concluded.

"I see."

The lecture had ended, and we had gone to a tavern quite far from the guild headquarters. Almelia had helped Rila when she'd lost her purse and gotten into a bit of trouble. The two had come to the Adventurers Guild to check on me. It was quite the peculiar chance encounter, especially for two women who should have been enemies.

"She certainly is a powerful girl, but...had I not had my collar, I am sure I would have been able to defeat her," Rila stated with confidence.

"I'd expect the same. I'd actually prefer it if you avoided associating with Almelia..."

"I sensed her feelings for you go beyond respect. It seems that she cares for you quite a bit, knave."

"Don't tease."

"I am calling it as I see it. What a hapless girl she is. Cute as she is, that one cannot compare to me."

“Almelia is still young. She’s far from ripe maturity, especially when measured against you,” I playfully shot back.

Immediately, Rila’s face flushed. She pressed her face against her stein and tried to hide it. “Ugh...I didn’t think you’d say something like that to me...”

She quickly finished her drink and ordered another. When it arrived, she drained it just as swiftly as the first.

“You cannot launch a surprise attack on me... I’m all riled up.....,” Rila chided, then emptied another one. “You ought to drink as well.”

“I am—and at the same pace as you,” I replied.

Her eyes had begun to droop. She was likely close to her limit.

“Hmph. Outdrinking you is entertaining...”

“*You* seem to be the one being outdone.”

The demon lord urged me to continue imbibing, so I did.

“How’s that guild employee know Geelman, anyway? What’s so wrong with me saying I’m his disciple! It’s not like I’m hurting anybody!” someone complained loudly.

When I looked in their direction, I found the lecturer Samuel cradling a mug in one hand.

He was talking to a guild staffer I didn’t recognize. Perhaps it was the one who’d asked him to give the lecture.

“If a guy learns the basics, *hic*, of magic from him, that makes the guy his disciple.”

“Y-yes, I suppose so, ha-ha. Though I’m not so sure that applies when he only gave you one lesson...,” the guild employee seated with Samuel replied, saying the latter bit in a more hushed tone. The best way to respond to an inebriated man’s ramblings might have been to let it go into one ear and out the other rather than arguing.

“So, I think that your incredible strength is something to lov... lov...lov... Ugh. I’m not in love with you, but you’re not in love with me. *Gnash, gnash*. But, you know what?! I—as the demon lord—I oversaw Hell.”

Speaking of, my own drunkard seemed to be losing her coherence as time when on.

“How much longer will it be until we have a child...,” the demon lord groaned, making way her to my side. She looked wretched.

To keep from teetering backward or falling over, she had to lean on me. It looked like we were done with drinking for the night. I settled the bill and lent Rila a shoulder.

“Wh-where are you trying to take me. I...*hic*...”

“You’ve had too much.”

It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that her face, which had been red, was now white as a sheet.

To a Proctor Seminar, Part II

“Ughhh...ow...my head...it smarts...,” Rila groaned from the bed.

She’d gotten a bit too free on this trip of ours and drank too much last night.

“Knave...I...might be done for...,” she said, tears collecting in her eyes as she latched on to me. “In my dream...I was being chased by something like a little finger... It must be a terrible omen of something to come...”

As I saw it, she was getting her just deserts for acting like a buffoon.

“You probably won’t be doing anything today.”

I peeled Rila off me and went down to the innkeeper to get a pitcher of water, then brought it back to the room.

“I’m going to the seminar. You behave.”

With that, I went to the hall in the guild headquarters where the lesson would be held.

I sat in the same seat as yesterday, and the employees of the other branch guilds greeted me.

“Roland Argan! Is there a Roland Argan of the Lahti branch here?” A staffer from the guild headquarters came in looking for me.

“Yes, that’s me,” I responded.

“Count Jigeems Constantine has summoned you. Please come with me immediately.”

I stood up and followed the employee. “Who exactly is that?” I inquired.

“You don’t know Count Jigeems? There were several aristocrats involved in establishing the Adventurers Guild, and Count Jigeems, current head of the House of Constantine, was one of them,” explained the employee.

“Is that right?”

“This might have something to do with that incident yesterday...”

That seemed plausible.

When I examined the guild worker more closely, I realized he was the one who’d been with Samuel at the tavern last night.

Count Jigeems, or whoever he was, had his own office in the guild headquarters.

“Try not to get on his bad side. Lord Jigeems isn’t a patient man. He’s called the Government Decapitator because he supposedly sends the heads of those he doesn’t care for flying,” the guild worker cautioned.

“That sounds quite frightening.”

Decapitating someone off the battlefield was a form of exhibitionism. One of its merits was that it was guaranteed to be fatal, so it was a preferred method among the skilled.

“Well, that’s it,” the employee said before leaving me outside the room.

I’m supposed to be listening to the seminar, though...

Whatever this was, I wanted to wrap it up quickly. I knocked and heard a voice from inside.

“Enter.”

“Excuse me.”

The chamber looked similar to Iris’s office back home. Within it sat a man a few years into his thirties who I assumed to be Count Jigeems.

“I’m Roland Argan. I have come from the Lahti branch. I’ve been taking training courses here since yesterday,” I said by way of introduction.

“Yes, I’m aware. Word is you helped out Samuel yesterday,” the man remarked.

“No. All I did was point out there was a superior method of doing things.”

“Now, that’s going to cause problems,” Count Jigeems said as he stroked his perfectly groomed beard. “You see, I was the one who recognized Samuel’s talents and instated him as the instructor for all the full-time adventurers around here as well as my more capable knights.”

Aristocrats often would make up their own rules and traditions. As a social outcast, I didn’t understand their need for prestige and honor.

“You’ve spoken out of line, which might cause others to believe my knights and adventurers have studied inefficient methods.”

Truthfully, that seemed correct to me, but I held my tongue.

“I have one request. Apologize to Samuel. Say you were in the wrong. That’s all I ask.”

“...But my way of doing things is actually much more efficient—” I tried to protest.

“That’s not relevant to the conversation,” Count Jigeems cut me off, looking vexed. “I couldn’t care less about what’s right or wrong or what you do or don’t want to do. This is a matter of honor. Samuel’s,

and by extension, his employers, the House of Constantine's, have been besmirched."

If the guild workers took the story home and told others, I suppose it really would put a dent in the House of Constantine's honor. As I questioned what I was supposed to do about it, Count Jigeems stood up. He drew a propped-up longsword from its sheath.

"I know...yes, I do...I know the smell of someone like me. You've killed many yourself, haven't you? How many? Five? Ten?"

"...No..."

Well, that was sudden.

Count Jigeems stared at his blade as though he were captivated by it and said, "Hmph. I've killed sixteen! And I remember them all..." He looked like he was in a trance.

I'd never killed anyone for pleasure before, not even once.

The man grazed my cheek with the edge of the blade.

"What level are you at?" he inquired.

"Excuse me?"

"I can hear the voices of the dead. 'Help me.' 'Please stop.' 'Why would you do something like this?' Things like that."

"Uh-huh..."

I'd been wondering how this hedonistic murderer would shape up, and now I knew.

"Their cries pair finely with a nice drink... Perhaps I'll make it seventeen?"

He was threatening me directly, trying to pressure me. Staring down the threat, I grabbed the edge of the blade.

"—! What did you...?! Why can't I get it to move?!"

"...Since you're still nothing more than a 'fledgling killer,' allow me to explain things to you, Count Jigeems. You say you hear voices of the dead? Those are simply auditory hallucinations produced by your conscience."

"My conscience...? I abandoned that thing long ago."

"This lust for murder is an act. Without it, you wouldn't have been able to keep yourself together. That's the sort of person you are."

He was far from reaching that level.

"What are you saying?! I take the heads of those who displease me!"

"The corpses don't speak. Your mind continuously replays the words that have been etched into it. You say the voices of the dead pair finely with a drink? How boorish. Are you sure you're not drinking to escape from the delusions tormenting you?"

Count Jigeems had barely killed at all and was already losing his grip on sanity. Alcohol had become his escape.

That made him nothing more than a novice.

While assassinating for the sake of a mission was different from deliberate murder, I'd gone through a similar experience a decade ago.

"You killed someone in the heat of the moment. You did it again, turning it into a bad habit, but you couldn't stand the guilt. That's all there is to it," I stated.

Count Jigeems's grip on his weapon slackened, and when I released the blade, it fell to the floor.

"Please do not forget them—the faces or the lives of the people you ended. No matter what you do in your lifetime, they will curse you always. Please don't try to run from that feeling."

That was something I wouldn't forget after killing. I wouldn't run from those I'd slain. Such was my method of doing things.

"Even unprepared for the repercussions, you stole the lives of many, all for the sake of your vice."

Count Jigeems stumbled away from me as I spoke.

"How many have you killed...?" he asked, frightened to hear the answer.

"Do you remember how many breaths you've taken in your life, Count?"

"How many...? No...I don't, but—"

"Of course not," I replied.

Once the man realized what I was saying, he was at a loss for words.

"..."

It was clear he now saw me quite differently.

"Please have Samuel apologize for being an embarrassment in public," I instructed.

Count Jigeems gave me a slight nod.

"...I—I understand. You needn't worry about Samuel anymore. However, my family would welcome an employee like you. How much would I need to pay?"

"I'm sorry. I like my current occupation."

The count told me our meeting was adjourned, so I assumed I could leave. As I placed my hand on the doorknob, I heard him speak up from behind me.

"Who...are you?"

"I believe I already introduced myself, didn't I? I am a mere guild staffer," I replied, then left the room.

When I returned to the meeting room, the lecture was already underway. This time it was about skills, their groupings, and their

effects.

Much like yesterday's lesson, it was the barest basics and thus boring to anyone who already knew that much.

Since this lecture was the last of the two-day seminar, several people invited me to a meal after it ended, but I turned them down.



"Hey, Rila. We're heading home."

Back at the inn, I found Rila looking utterly exhausted from her hangover.

"N-no...I still...can't say I've had my fill of the capital..." she blurted out, looking deathly pale.

"I just set up a Gate. We can come back another time."

"...If that's the case..."

She slumped over, unconscious.

Since it was more convenient, I transformed her into her feline form, put her in my pack, and departed.

Just as I was about to head for the stables to fetch my horse, someone called out to me. "Am I mistaken, or are you Roland Argan?" The man wore a guild employee's uniform. By the looks of it, he seemed to have been in a hurry. He was out of breath.

"Yes, that's me."

"The guild master...Mr. Tallow Paulo...is asking for you."

Another nostalgic name.

Yet, I'd already finished my job. I didn't have business in the capital anymore.

"If *he's* calling *me*, he must have risen in life," I remarked.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing. Why don't you tell him that I was already gone by the time you came to the inn?"

"B-but... The master has been out the last few days and only recently returned. And he found out the seminar was finished, so he had me rush over to—"

"Then let me amend that: Tell him to come find me on his own two feet."

"I—I—I couldn't say that! Could you at least come to greet or..."

Since I'd set up a Gate, I could travel home near instantaneously. On top of that, the seminar was over for today, so I was free to do anything I wanted until tomorrow.

I'd wanted to go home and take it easy, but I suppose ten minutes couldn't hurt.

"...All right. I'll go."

“You really aren’t even trying to hide your reluctance...”

Once more, I headed to the guild headquarters.

Supposedly, guild master was the highest position in the Adventurers Guild. That also made him the chairman of the Adventurers Association.

Tallow Paulo and I had a shared history. Come to think of it, he’d been the one to spill the beans to Iris that I had been an assassin. That’d partially been my own fault for not going to the trouble to change my name, but who goes around revealing a person’s past to others for no reason? He’d inserted himself into my business.

“Um, I don’t think you should act like that in front of the guild master... From one guild employee to another, I’m a little worried for you...”

“I’ll behave.”

Truthfully, I had no intention to, but I told this staffer that anyway.

Once we got to the headquarters, we headed up many flights of stairs. On the top floor, the employee accompanying me pointed to a door at the end of a hallway and told me, “It’s over there.”

I barged straight in without bothering to knock.

“Uh, what do you think you’re—?”

Paying no mind to the panicking staffer behind me, I closed the door behind my back without bothering to turn around.

Sitting at the ridiculously large desk was a slightly weathered and familiar face that sported angular features, a beard, and some out-of-place round eyes.

“Ohhh! Oh-ho-ho-ho! Haven’t seen each other since the Human-Fiend War, have we! It’s really you, Roland?”

“Was there an impostor going around?”

I quickly headed in and plopped myself right onto the leather sofa.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho. How like you to say something like that.”

“And you seem just as boisterous as ever,” I replied.

A smile suddenly made its way to our faces. Tallow came over and gave me a handshake.

“So you really are working as a guild employee, then?”

“Thanks to you, Iris knows I used to be an assassin.”

“Oh-ho-ho. It just slipped right out of my mouth. Sorry.”

Tallow was something of a pupil of mine, but he’d run off after only a month. As it happened, he was also older than me—we were a generation apart.

While I was operating covertly, purely as an assassin, Tallow had made his debut as a top adventurer. He’d been something of an anomaly during the war, because the king had assigned him forces to lead.

After he'd earned a reputation for his successes as an adventurer and shown his stuff in the war, he'd been appointed the position of guild master in recognition for his accomplishments.

"So, what do you want from me? If you tell me you just wanted to get a look at my face, I'm heading straight home."

"Oh, don't be so hasty. I've got something very important to say."

I stared at Tallow. He appeared serious.

"Do you know what a broadscale quest is?" he asked.

"I'm one of your employees. Of course I do."

A broadscale quest was a significant undertaking, the largest-scale quest any group could take on. While the particulars varied, clients were usually governments or other large organizations, rather than an individual. There had been several in the past, but I hadn't seen any in my tenure at the guild.

"If a broadscale quest were to take place, you would be the one handling any adventurers near the Lahti branch..." Tallow stated.

"Likely."

"Previously, we've entrusted the matter of leadership to the adventurers themselves. But that can give rise to internal conflicts. Everyone wants to secure their own self-interests, that sort of thing. It causes disputes."

"Which you wouldn't want during a battle," I concluded.

"Exactly right. We've decided to install a tactical adviser post where a guild employee can take command of adventurers during broadscale quests. Sounds good, don't you think?"

Tallow informed me he'd already checked in with each branch and gone through the necessary procedures.

"This might come as a surprise, but His Majesty himself immediately approved the idea, on one condition."

"...Wait."

"I'd like you to take the role, Roland."

"No thanks."

"That was quick! You couldn't even pretend to hesitate?"

"Why me?"

Tallow waved his hand dismissively. "You know why. Come on now, I have something else we need to discuss."

"Something else?" I repeated.

"Do you know what's going on in Hell? We've heard talk that the demon lord has returned."

"..."

"No one's sure whether it was the same one the hero defeated or a new entity. If something happens, there's only one group that can take swift action. That won't be the army, the order of chivalry, or the aristocracy's private troops. It'll be the guild."

“So, in the very slight possibility that a broadscale quest does occur, you’re saying you’d like me to take command?”

“That is exactly right.”

Rila and I had been forced to reveal that the demon lord was still alive to quell some extremists a while back. Who knew our decision would have caused this, of all things.

Still, I knew that a broadscale quest was unlikely ever to happen.

“Can I count on you? Regardless of your involvement, your branch in Lahti should remain safe and peaceful.”

At present, the demon lord that had supposedly made her comeback was struggling through a hangover in my pack.

“Fine. If anything happens, I’ll take command,” I accepted.

“That will be of great help. And this won’t be on you alone. There’ll be one person from each region. I’ll inform them immediately.”

That being the end of the discussion, I stood up. However, when I tried to leave, Tallow said to me, “Hey, Roland. You know anything about this demon lord business?”

“Nothing. The hero party killed the demon lord. Someone must have mistakenly assumed the demon lord came back to life, or this is some new demon lord.”

“I see.”

The demon lord had died. Actually, maybe it was more accurate to say she was *still* dead.

I left Tallow’s office and the guild headquarters behind.

After retrieving my horse from the stables, I made for the Gate I had set up. After finding a vacant spot where no one would see me near the outer wall, I activated the spell with Rila and steed in tow.



Upon arriving home, I heard a voice from my pack.

“Was that about me?”

It seemed she’d been listening in on my conversation with Tallow.

“You were awake? It might be a different demon lord. It’s not like they only appear once in a hundred years, right?”

“...That is true.”

I took Rila out of my bag and returned her to her human form. She’d evidently recovered from her hangover and was looking better.

“I overheard. So it seems you’ve gotten yourself a promotion, have you, knave?”

“I don’t know if I’d call it a promotion.”

“The tactical adviser,” Rila said, eyes glittering. “*The* tactical

adviser.”

“Okay, I get it already.”

She clearly liked the sound of the title.

“We must celebrate! Knave, you may buy alcohol. And meats.”

“You’re getting juice.”

“Grrr... Th-then we shall not celebrate...”

Apparently, she’d just wanted to get drunk.

I wondered why Tallow had asked if I knew anything about the demon lord. The only one who knew I’d fought her was the client, King Randolph. Almelia and the others didn’t know anything; the best they could provide was groundless speculation.

“Is something the matter, Tactical Adviser?” Rila questioned.

“No, nothing.”

“When you get another break, we should go to the capital again.”

“Don’t let your purse get stolen next time.”

“Grrr... Such a bitter memory...”

As Rila made a face, I urged her to head inside. That night, we enjoyed a slightly more extravagant meal than usual.

The Hated Becomes Liked

“...”

Roje had been staring at me up close since first thing in the morning.

The elf had been Rila's guard during her demon lord days. Once she had found out Rila and I were living together, she would stop by on occasion and shadow Rila for a bit. She couldn't swallow the intimate relationship I, a human, had with the demon lord.

“Roje Sandsong, if there's something you'd like to say, I'm all ears.”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

Roje ate Rila's homemade soup a sip at a time, looking like a monk in training as she did. From the look of it, she could only stomach Rila's cooking if she kept her mind clear of thoughts.

“Today...you may take this.”

Rila, who'd been in the kitchen for a while and hadn't eaten anything herself yet, set a box down in front of me on the edge of the table.

“What's this?” I asked.

“I believe it's what you'd call a boxed lunch.”

“I see. Are you saying I should take this to eat later?”

“Ummmm...I heard from the housewives in town about it,” Rila replied, seeming embarrassed. “They say that when one has a p-partner, this is *normal*...”

“...Tsk.” Roje clucked her tongue. This elf had a severe attitude problem. “Lord Rileyla, what of mine?” she inquired.

“Why would you need one?”

“I-I suppose you are correct...! I-in that case! Shall I make you one, Lord Rileyla?”

“Hmm? I have no need for a boxed lunch...but do as you please.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

I had to leave now, or I'd be late for work. I stood up and put Rila's packaged homemade meal in my bag and headed for the door. Before I made it out, however, Rila rushed over to see me off.

“I'm headed out,” I stated.

“Mm, mm-hmm. Have a safe trip.” Rila fidgeted, looking as though there was more she wished to say, but she remained quiet.

“...?” When I cocked my head to the side in puzzlement and turned my back to her, she planted a kiss on my cheek. “Rila—” Before I could say anything more, she scurried away, red to her ears.

“...?”

Apparently, she’d made friends in this town and knew more people. It seemed that, just as I was, Rila was learning what it meant to be normal.

“I-is that a fabled ‘good-bye kiss’?!”

Roje, who had witnessed the whole display, was quivering.

“You bastard! Don’t you get too smug about this! Just because you were lucky enough to be on the receiving end of something so joyous this morning... Heeey! Listen to meee!”

I closed the front door and headed to the guild like I did every morning.

Though I did have a Gate at the ready, the commute served as my morning walk, so I chose not to use the spell.

Roje’s visits were anywhere from a few days to a week long. When they were over, she went back to Hell for a while and then showed up at our house again after some time. Rinse and repeat.

“The Great Lord is worried about you, Lord Rileyla,” Roje had told us. It left me confident that she was giving reports about Rila.

Our morning assembly got underway. After an uneventful meeting, everyone set to their tasks. The adventurers came in to complete quests and ask about jobs at the reception desk.

“Mr. Roland...someone’s been spying on us from outside for a while...,” Milia quietly whispered into my ear.

Female guild employees like Milia and Iris easily attracted adventurer stalkers. It was only natural for them to be frightened of suspicious characters. Milia was tenderhearted and would interact with anyone, and the other female employees had told me that caused some people to get the wrong idea.

“Over there.”

Ahead of where Milia pointed, I caught a glimpse of someone skulking around. They disappeared and then peeked back up again, briefly showing their face.

It was difficult to tell for certain, since it had been so quick, but I swore I knew who it was.

“M-maybe I should call someone from the order of chivalry...”

“It’s all right,” I told Milia and headed outside.

The suspicious figure wore a hooded robe. That certainly did make her look dangerous.

“Hey, Roje Sandson. Is there something you need?”

She stopped in her tracks, pulled off her hood, and turned around. Her silky, beautiful hair fluttered in the morning sun. A smile crossed her beautiful face, which had the chiseled features of an elf.

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

After clicking her tongue, her expression immediately twisted into a scowl.

“I do not accept you. However, the Great Lord...and Lord Rileyla have taken an interest in you. I do not accept that either. Y-you were so...intimate last night...and I heard your voices as you, um...” Roje awkwardly trailed off.

“...Did you want to join us?”

“N-no! What I’m trying to say is...”

“That you’re embarrassed to say it yourself, but you really wanted an invitation to join us?”

“N-no?”

“Rila’s taken an interest in me, and it has you confused, then?”

“That’s right. I think?”

What, had she fallen for me or something?

“You’re an elf, a long-lived and celebrated race. You should be more careful about who you choose to be with.”

“I have no need to choose anyone.”

“...In that case, would you like to try adventuring?”

“Listen to what I’m saying! You’re ridiculous!” Roje sighed, in a terrible mood. I’d thought my offer was a good one, but she obviously disagreed.

“Regardless, I think I shall see whether you truly are worthy of being Lord Rileyla’s partner.”

Ah. That’s why she’s been watching me.

“Do as you please. If you’re so keen on spectating, why not come inside? It’d certainly be a better view than from out here.”

“Ha-ha-ha. You will come to regret that soon enough.”

I thought that would be better since having a creepy person hanging around was only bound to make the other employees anxious.

All eyes fell upon Roje and me when we entered.

“Did that guy just walk in with an elf?”

“It’s not just the hero; he’s even got dealings with the elves...”

It wasn’t just the adventurers. My coworkers’ mouths gaped as they looked on.

One could find elves in metropolitan areas like the capital and rural settlements near dense forests. However, they were a rare sight in the average town.

“From here, you can observe me to your heart’s content,” I said.

“All right.”

I returned to my seat.

Several gazes trained on me, practically demanding an explanation.

“Miss Milia, it seems that suspicious person you saw earlier was that elf. She will be watching me work today,” I explained.

“Huh? So you know each other?”

“Yes, in a manner of speaking. I think she might have feelings for me.”

“Huh?! What?!” Milia’s face went from surprised to perplexed. As though to confirm my assertion, she glanced at Roje.

“Today is the day I’ll unmask you for who you truly are! Heh-heh-heh...,” Roje muttered.

“I don’t think she does! She wouldn’t be cackling under her breath after looking at you if she did!”

“Elves are so peculiar,” I replied.

“Yes, they really are—wait, no, even if they are, I don’t think that’s what’s happening!”

Really?

When it came to most women, I usually knew what they were thinking, but I had no idea what was going on in Roje’s head.

“Mr. Roland, if someone liked you, they’d do things like follow you with their eyes without realizing it.”

She has been watching me all morning...

Even now, Roje was staring at me quite intently while I worked.

“Or, when your gazes meet, it’ll startle her, and she’ll turn away without thinking.”

As if in time with Milia’s words, I did meet Roje’s eyes and the elf hurriedly looked the other way.

“Um, why would they look away? I thought they were following me,” I questioned.

“Right, but a girl in love would become too embarrassed to stare into the eyes of the man she loves.” Milia blushed as she explained.

From her seat, Roje held up a piece of paper. *Why are you looking at me? Do your work!* was scrawled on it.

“You could say that girls aren’t straightforward about their feelings because they’re sensitive,” Milia continued.

Roje, is that it? You just can’t bring yourself to be straightforward about your feelings? I wondered.

“But you can’t treat a girl like she’s a chore or abandon her because of that.”

Roje was looking at me. But when I met her gaze, she’d tell me to get back to work. According to Milia, that wasn’t how she felt, though. On the contrary, she wanted me to pay attention to her.

More and more, I felt like I had no idea what was going on. I'd found a type of woman I didn't understand. When I thought back on it, I'd never been with an elf before.

"I guess that's just how elves are....," I remarked idly.

"No, it doesn't matter whether someone's an elf. Any girl could feel that way...even me...ha-ha..." Milia glanced at me as she continued. "I think if a girl like that knew you, she'd probably want you to be really kind to her," she said bashfully; then she giggled to herself in a muffled way.

"Be kind... I see..."

I went about my work as usual while staying aware of what Roje was doing. Before long, it was time for my break.

When I left the guild from the back, Roje blocked the way.

"Where do you think you're going? You have your homemade food from Lord Rileyla, don't you? Heh-heh-heh...perhaps you can't stand the taste, and you're sneakily—"

"I've never thought her cooking tasted bad."

"...I-I see... What a terrible thing I've said..."

For some reason, Roje seemed defeated.

"I was just going to offer you some, too. You wanted your own, didn't you?" I pulled the boxed lunch Rila had made from my bag.

"A-are you trying to win me over...?! Damn it, that's kind of nice of you...ha-ha-ha. However! Regifting something Lord Rileyla made you is inexcusable!"

"Rila made it for me, so I'm still going to eat half of it."

"Guh, you've thought of everything, haven't you?"

Since there wasn't a place to comfortably eat, we ended up borrowing the reception room so Roje and I could split the meal Rila had made.

Unsurprisingly, Roje fainted after two bites, so in the end, I ate most of it. She always insisted on eating Rila's cooking, but lost consciousness almost immediately. It struck me as kind of rude.

Well, I suppose every person has their own way of showing devotion.

After lunch, Roje started observing me from outside again.

"Are there times when a woman wants attention so badly that she'll distance herself from the one she loves?" I asked Milia.

"If pushing doesn't work, then pulling can be another tactic, yes. It's a simple approach....," she replied.

"Hmm. I don't think that's the case here, though. Actually, if it's not, then I'm in trouble..."

As Roje watched me from the shade of a tree, three large men

approached her from behind.

She crossed her arms and was arguing with them about something. I hurried over.

“Elves sure are purty.”

“And she’s got skin white as snow...”

“Hey, you wanna come with us for a little bit?”

The three men smiled lewdly.

“Don’t touch me, you craven idiots. I’ll kill you.”

The ruffians were getting louder by the second and seemed thrilled. No matter how Roje objected, to them, it seemed like a go-ahead.

I could tell Roje was about to use a spell, so I cut between her and the men and whispered quietly, “...Don’t use magic. You’ll attract attention. They’ve already seen your face, and you use spells that are rare even among elves, right?”

“But...,” Roje protested.

I wrenched up the hand of the man who had grabbed Roje’s arm.

“Ouchie! Ouch, ouch—”

“I know this person. Do you have some business with her?” I demanded.

Immediately, the man’s eyes went wide, and he backed away.

“A-Argan, sir?”

“Hey, we’re in trouble. This guy’s supposedly got three thousand adventurer underlings at his disposal!”

“W-we gotta scram—”

When did I get these supposed underlings? And why three thousand of them...?

The ruffians quickly fled.

“Th-three thousand...?! That’s the same as an entire regiment...” Roje had taken the whole thing at face value.

“You already stand out as is. And if they find out who you are, that’s bound to cause a commotion.”

Roje had previously disguised herself as a dark elf, so things might have been fine, though.

“I admit I was acting rash. Also...you saved me... Thank you...” Roje quickly shook her head. Her face was a little flushed. “B-but I would have been able to manage even if you hadn’t! You were out of line. I—I still don’t approve of you!” She pointed an accusatory finger at me.

“That’s fine.”

“You’re only somewhat handsome and competent at your job! Plus, you gallantly come dashing in when maidens are in trouble! And it’s amazing you have an entire regiment— Wait, that’s not the point! Also, that was enough to make me like you more... Wait, no, it wasn’t!

Don't think any of that convinced me that you're a suitable partner for Lord Rileyla," she spat, then zoomed away.

Evidently, both master and servant had a similar exit strategy.

The Man Who Learned Too Much and the Slaves

The day continued, and I went about the usual sort of work until a man in flashy armor stopped by.

“Hey, isn’t that...the S-rank guy?” one of my coworkers whispered.

“What’s he doing here?” asked another.

His armor clattered as he walked. He clutched several lengths of rope in his hand. Bound at the end of each one was a woman in rags. There were four altogether, a beastwoman, an elf, a human, and a dwarf. Their eyes all looked vacant.

“...”

A stir ran through the hall as the man headed toward me.

“It’s you, right? You’re the one called Roland Argan?”

“That would be me. What kind of quest are you looking for today?”

“You don’t know who I am?”

“I apologize. I’m afraid not.”

He pulled out his adventurer permit and showed them to me.

Lenny Conty. Rank S. Twenty-two years old.

His skill was Clairvoyance.

“I didn’t come here for a quest.”

“Then what are you—?” I started before being interrupted.

“I know everything. Even who you are and how you currently live.”

“...”

“Oh, but don’t kill me or anything.”

Lenny raised both of his hands and laughed lightly.

Everyone was watching us. I had no idea just how much this man was wise to, but it seemed like a change of location was in order.

“I don’t want to fight or anything. I just want that partner you’ve got,” Lenny stated.

“...My partner?”

“Now, don’t make me repeat myself—I know everything.”

“If you do, then please don’t force me to speak about private

matters here.”

“Oh, how rude of me. I’ll wait for you to return to your house. Fine by you?”

“And if I refuse?”

“I’ll still do it anyway.”

Lenny turned to leave, dragging his slave women after him.

With his departure, the atmosphere relaxed.

“Mr. Roland, do you know Mr. Lenny?” Milia asked me.

“No, that was our first time meeting,” I replied.

“I see... That Clairvoyance skill sure is scary. He’s wise to everyone’s secrets...”

Milia wasn’t entirely off base, but he wouldn’t have invoked Clairvoyance in the first place unless he already knew something about me. The skill didn’t grant him insight into those he wasn’t familiar with. I couldn’t think of anything, but he must have learned of me somehow.

“By ‘partner,’ does he mean...?” Milia muttered.

“It seems like he only wants to talk. It should be fine,” I said.

“I haven’t heard good things about Mr. Lenny, so I’m a bit worried myself...” Milia glanced in the direction of my house.

Rila was as good as powerless at the moment. I was concerned about her to an extent, but this man had come all the way here seeking something from me. He probably wouldn’t rough her up. Had he been planning to do that, he would’ve gone to my home while I was at my job.

After work was over, I went straight back to the house.

Lenny’s women were tied to a tree. He really was treating them like slaves.

Upon entering, Rila didn’t greet me as she usually did. Instead, she sat in the living room, looking upset. Lenny was with her.

“Knave, who is this man?” she demanded.

“Who knows. Apparently, he wants my ‘partner.’”

“I heard. He is a foolish sort,” Rila responded with a harrumph.

“Hey, welcome back. Let’s get right into discussions, shall we?” Lenny said.

“There’s no conversation to be had,” I shot back.

“You plan to refuse, then? I wish you wouldn’t make me keep repeating myself. I know that this red-haired demon is the demon lord and that you’re the actual hero who defeated her.”

““ ... ””

“I’m not sure what led to it, but it looks like you’re living the domestic life, and you’ve both left behind your high standings. I’d heard rumors of an accomplished guild employee, and happened to

spot you at the headquarters not too long ago.” Lenny laid everything out thoroughly.

“So your point is that I should give you Rila to keep you quiet?”

“Exactly. I’m building a collection, you see. I haven’t got a demon yet. And she’s the demon lord to boot. Seems like quite the catch, don’t you think?”

“You’re a disgusting creature,” Rila spat.

“Rileyla, that’s the last time you’ll be saying anything like that,” Lenny shot back.

“Oh please.” Rila waved her hand as though done with this event.

“I’ve done a bit of research on your Clairvoyance skill...,” I professed.

“Hmm. Figure out anything interesting?”

If he knew that much about our circumstances, I couldn’t let him live. I was definitely killing him after this. However, if that was the case, it meant he couldn’t see into the future.

The skill differed from actual foresight.

“Your ability is powerful, but it doesn’t have much scope. By your own admission you only caught wise the moment you *spotted* me. That means the person needs to be within your field of vision.”

As long as I was in his blind spot, he couldn’t use his skill against me.

“...” Lenny said nothing.

Bull’s-eye.

“And, you can only see what someone says and does. You can’t peer into their head and read thoughts. I have no idea how you made it to rank S... Actually, seeing that ridiculous armor, I suppose I do. Your skill got you dirt that you used to blackmail your way up in life. Anyone with future sight wouldn’t need armor. Nothing would ever be an emergency if you knew it beforehand.”

The smile Lenny had previously been wearing finally gave way to unease.

“Lenny or whoever you are...,” Rila began.

“Wh-what?”

“You would do well not to anger this man.”

“A-anger him...? How is he angry?”

“I can tell. That is all I will say on the matter.”

“Huh? What?”

“It seems you can’t see your own future.”

I sat down on the sofa, and Lenny scowled as he watched me cautiously.

Rila came over to my side and yawned. She’d lost interest in Lenny.

“You’re the first person not directly involved to realize the demon

lord still lives. Other than King Randolph himself, you're the only human to know I defeated her."

"Ha-ha, thought that'd be the case. If you don't want me revealing everything, hand over the demon lord quietly. I'll treat her better than you ever did."

"Poking around into people's pasts isn't what I'd call a decent hobby," I stated while activating Unobtrusive.

Though I'd been sitting across from Lenny, I'd instantly come to be standing behind him. To Lenny, it undoubtedly looked like I'd disappeared. That he was still looking at the sofa was proof. By the time the surprise showed on his face, I'd started strangling him from behind.

"Hah-guuuuuh!"

He'd been blind even to his own future.

"You *are* powerful, but you relied on your eyes—and your skill—too much."

He'd never sensed the murderous intent coming off me. The man lacked real experience in combat.

"One final bit of advice before you die. Some things in the world are better left unknown."

This guy had no sense of self-preservation.

That was all there was to it.

Because he had relied on his skill to rise in the ranks, he didn't have enough practical battle knowledge.

"What a dreary man. He probably never even considered *how* I'd defeated the demon lord," I remarked.

Had he known all he claimed to, he would have understood how dangerous it was to approach Rila and me. I could have confused him with Real Nightmare, but that would have left me wondering when it might come undone. Instead, I chose to eliminate the danger in the simplest way.

"Even if I had handed you over, he still could have outed me. Killing him was the only option."

Lenny finally expired.

"He was a rather entertaining man, especially with that nonsense he spouted about wanting me," Rila stated.

I agreed.

"His entire life, he employed the same trick to further himself," I said.

“And now they’ve led him safely into the hands of death...I suppose,” Rila replied.

I shouldered the corpse.

“But are you sure about having done this? Even if in name only, he is still a famous adventurer, is he not?”

“Tomorrow morning, this body will be unrecognizable, and Lenny will be just another missing person.”

“Hmm.” Rila hummed. “Why were you angry? That’s unusual of you. Could it be that you were...worried I’d be taken away?”

“Possibly.”

Rila nodded, looking pleased. “Knave, you are sometimes very charming. Mm-hmm.”

I went outside, jumped from the Gate near the woods, and abandoned the body. Bandits would steal his armor and papers. Monsters and beasts would scavenge the corpse. After a night, he’d be unidentifiable.

Once I got home, I freed the tethered slaves. They bore brands of servitude, so I used Dispell.

“You have no master anymore. You can go anywhere you please.”

There was never a better day to go to sleep early. When I went to bed, Rila came by.

“You did it to protect me, did you not? I have caused you trouble.”

“The whole thing would’ve just been a huge inconvenience to me.”

Rila held me close.

“That works as well. I...do not want to leave you either...”

She kissed my forehead twice.

“Souya huum shinon.”

“What does that mean?”

“It is a demonic good luck prayer... It means... Well, it’s embarrassing to say, so I will not.”

Rila rolled over and showed me her pale back. It seemed like she was about to go straight to sleep, but I fondled her breast from behind.

“Hmphngh?”

“Now I’m curious. Tell me.”

“...Ugh...it means...‘May your bliss never run dry.’”

I could tell Rila’s face was red even though it was dark. I forced

her to face me and kissed her slightly warm forehead twice myself.

“Souya huum shinon... Is that it?”

“Uh, mm-hmm...,” she answered.

Her clothes rustled. In a room so quiet that our breathing was audible, it was very easy to hear.

“...The two of us are accomplices to the same crime. We have lied to the world.”

“I guess you’re right.”

My eyes grew accustomed to the dark, and I saw that Rila’s crimson eyes were glistening. As though affirming the other’s presence, we kissed several times.



The next morning, the four slaves I’d freed yesterday were still in front of the house.

“...What are you doing?”

Lenny had said he wanted Rila—or rather, any demon—in his collection. In keeping with that, each of his slaves was of a different race: a human, a beastwoman, a dwarf, and an elf.

“Um...we wanted to ask you something,” the human woman responded. “We would like to thank you, but we have nothing...so would you please allow us to help you in some way?”

“I’m not sure I have anything for you to assist me with...” I didn’t know how to respond, so I ended up scowling. “I told you to live your lives freely, didn’t I?”

The beastwoman nodded.

The color of her tail and the shape of her ears resembled a fox’s.

“This is our decision as free people. We want to repay our debt.”

So that’s what this was. Sudden liberty might have presented them with its own set of problems. They were wearing rags and had no money to go anywhere.

“Then would you like to become adventurers? I can’t guarantee that you’ll pass the exam, though.”

“Would that...be helping you...?” the elf questioned. I nodded.

This wasn’t a topic to discuss in front of the house. I invited the four inside and let them bathe.

“How admirable of you.” Rila seemed pleased as she made some soup.

Once the former slaves were clean, I gave them some of Rila’s clothes. Though they were reluctant to impose, once I told them it would be more of a problem to have them half-naked in rags, they readily accepted the new attire.

After a proper rinse, I realized they were all very beautiful women.

I sat them at the dining table and served them Rila's cooking. They made faces for a moment, but then ate the soup without complaint.



“Lenny was a terrible man. Even if you hadn’t, Sir Roland, someone would have eventually done him in. That was how much we hated him,” the human woman stated, and the others bobbed their heads in agreement.

“Sir Roland... We know nothing about what happened yesterday,” the beastwoman said in a soft voice.

“That would help me.”

The dwarf seemed like she wanted to mention something, but only managed, “...Um...”

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

She was small like a child, but that was typical of dwarf adults. Lenny had likely had his way with them whenever he wanted. Whether this dwarf woman was naturally shy or it had been learned, I couldn’t say. Eventually, she stammered out, “Would you...name me?”

“Name you?”

I didn’t know what to make of it. I suppose she just didn’t want to be called what she had been until now because of the memories the moniker carried.

“It would seem my time has come.” Rila puffed up her chest. “You there, human, you are Eelu. You, beastwoman, are Lyan. Dwarf, you are Sanz, and, elf, you are Su.”

Their faces lit up.

Eelu lowered her head.

“Thank you, wife of our savior.”

“W-wife?” Rila perked up happily. “Wife...wife...oh-ho...what a lovely ring that has to it...”

She looked quite pleased.

“You can become adventurers. Once you’ve made enough money, you can live as you like. Return to your homes or continue to adventure,” I said.

“““““Yes. Thank you.”””””

It was a bit presumptuous of me to say they would be made adventurers. There was still the matter of the test, after all.

“You can live here for a while. You can’t spare the money anyway. Is that fine with you?” I turned to Rila.

“Mm-hmm. I do not mind. Since I am your wife, I cannot be stingy... Hee-hee.”

She was really harping on that point.

“Sir Roland...you are so kind,” the dwarf, Sanz, remarked.

The beastwoman Lyan nodded in agreement. “Sir Roland is a very good person. Especially to us slaves...”

“No, you’re not slaves. You’re helping me, which means that we’re allies. And taking care of comrades is only natural.”

“You may rest assured,” Rila appended with a smile. At which,

Eelu broke into tears, followed by the other three.

“Things were so terrible...until now...”

Before long, Rila was crying along with them.



Even though I was the proctor, I wasn't planning on going easy on them. There was a chance they would fail the exam. While I had been concerned about that, my fretting proved needless.

“Hee-hee-hee, looks like they're all equally amazing. That's really interesting.”

Milia had peeked at the paper I was holding, which showed the results.

“Yes. I was worried about what would happen.”

The four women looked so different than they had yesterday no one noticed they were the ones Lenny had been dragging around.

I handed each of them an adventurer permit.

“So this is what it looks like...,” the human observed.

“I'm so excited,” said the beastwoman.

“These...don't bend even when you try folding them,” the dwarf added.

“So now we're adventurers... We have an occupation,” stated the elf.

Typically, I taught adventurers individually, but since a quartet had passed today, I borrowed the reception room to train them.

“First, Eelu,” I began.

“Y-yes?”

“You were a terrible sight during the practical...but your mana measurement was above the standard.”

“Wh-which means...?”

“You have an aptitude for magic. I'll introduce you to someone who knows more about spells in the future. I'm sure they'll teach you many things.”

“Yes, sir!”

Lyan huffed as her tail wagged, full of excitement. “Eelu, that's amazing... What about me? What about me?”

“Wait, wait, one at a time. Lyan, you were the opposite. You had no aptitude for magic.”

The light disappeared from the fox-eared woman's eyes immediately.

“Then.....I'm no...good...?”

“However, you're more powerful than the average beastperson. You're quick, have a wide field of vision, and good hearing—all

excellent traits.”

All four were fairly capable physically, but as slaves, they’d never had an opportunity to exercise, so they had no stamina. That would change before long, though. Had *he* helped these four, they would have become much more than just his playthings.

“I think you have enough in your arsenal to be a scout.”

“Yaaay!”

As quickly as it had fallen, Lyan’s attitude rebounded.

The dwarf, Sanz, was staring at me.

“You’re the same as Lyan. As a dwarf, you’re already powerful, and you have plenty of potential to grow from practice. Your short stature is a boon unto itself, too. You’ll be a great berserker when attacking.”

“...I see... I’m glad.” She had little to say, but she broke into a smile.

“Ahem.” The elf, Su, glanced at me, trying to win me over.

“Su, I don’t think I need to state this, but you have an aptitude for magic, and you’re skilled at archery. I wouldn’t expect anything else from an elf.”

Su confidently turned her head to the other three as if to say, *You see?*

“Hmph...”

“Sir Roland, Su is actually the most promiscuous of us!”

Nod, nod.

“Hey! How’s that relevant?”

All of them emoted so much more than they had yesterday. Hope had returned to their faces.

“I don’t mind if you go solo to start, but I think you four would make a good team,” I said.

“In which case...as the one who got the most praise from you, I’d be the leader, right?” Su asked, which prompted the others to protest and assert their own qualities that made them most suited to the job.

The battle over the title had the reception room feeling quite lively. As I watched, something suddenly came to mind. Most slaves were used for manual labor. But, women like these were sometimes purchased for sexual predilections. They existed only to please their master. It felt incredibly wasteful to me.

Eventually, the quartet of newly minted adventurers decided to settle things via rock-paper-scissors.

“Well, I knew it. I’m the leader.”

Eelu was proudly looking at her scissors.

The other three hung their heads in defeat.

A mage typically fought from the rear of the formation. It was a vantage point where you could see everyone else. In that regard, Eelu

was a good fit.

“Sir Roland, we are looking forward to your future guidance.”

“Yes. If you’re ever in trouble, let me know.”

They would go out adventuring on their own, save up, and live each day on their own terms. It wasn’t stable employment, but to put it another way, the more they worked, the more money they’d save up. If they did that, it’d tie into their motivation. With that incentive, they’d work harder.

Perhaps they’d quit at some point, but that wouldn’t be for a while yet.



The four gave a strong showing on their first day, fulfilling several quests.

“Sir Roland, if you’re ever in trouble, I’d like to help you,” Lyan stated with a serious expression on her face.

I gave her a pat on the head, which made her squint and let out a strange sound. “Unhhgh...”

It seemed all of them felt the same way. They didn’t say as much, but I got that sense from them. They voluntarily took on cheap F-rank quests.

Someone called them the pretty girl squad, and that ended up sticking.

Every member of the group was praised for her motivation. That was good for adventurers but not so much for slaves. It really depended on who owned them, but having that drive was typically undesirable for a master.

I decided that if someone were forced into slavery, the most productive thing to do was free them.

After a while, the pretty girl squad stopped taking the quests they wanted and instead inquired which jobs needed to be taken, which were usually dull, low-stakes ones.

“Since all of you are rank E, you can take some slightly tougher quests now,” I said to Eelu, the human, who sat on the opposite side of the counter.

“No. It’s fine. We’re more interested in helping you out.”

Lyan popped up from behind Eelu’s shoulder. “Master Roland, what can we do for you today?”

“Guarding the fields...would be fine.” Sanz pushed up right in front of the other two.

Protecting the fields didn’t involve any combat. They would only

end up shooing away animals. It was common for a whole day to go by without incident. That left people with time on their hands—apparently too much time—which made it difficult work...supposedly.

And, since the clients were farmers, the reward was small. That was why the girls were staying at a very cheap inn and weren't dressed too well.

"It's all right if you don't want to do this, Su," I said to the elf, who was a step away from the other three.

"No, I do."

"...I see."

I collected their permits and searched for something suitable.

"They're calling him Master Roland?" an adventurer whispered.

"I definitely heard that, too. What are those girls to that guild employee?"

"They're not like, sex slaves, right? Hee-hee."

"Excuse me. Argan would never do something like that. Quit spreading weird rumors."

"That's right. This is why I hate you guys."

Male and female adventurers traded barbs loudly.

Does it really sound that suggestive when they called me "master"?

"I'd like to ask you to do this one." After deciding on a quest, I placed its stub on the counter.

All four girls looked at it at the same time.

"Antidote herb collection," Eelu read.

"And it's in the middle of the forest??" Lyan seemed pleased.

"And the payout is a hundred rins each... That's a ton," Sanz let slip, though she still had her usual deadpan expression.

"And if it's good quality, that might not be all... I know a great place to search," Su added cheerily.

They didn't seem to have any objections, so I went through the formalities.

The client was an apothecary, and since we regularly needed antidotes, if they collected too much for the client, we could take the rest to another druggist.

"Antidotes can be made from those plants, but they lose their efficacy pretty quickly, so there's a constant demand. I'm counting on you."

They all looked at one another and bowed their heads.

""""""Thank you very much.""""""

The four of them left the guild, filled with joy.

"They're not guarding the fields or cleaning the gutters today, are they?" Milia asked with a smile when I returned to my seat at the counter.

"...No. And I'm sure they'd get bored taking the same types of

quests all the time.”

“I could’ve sworn we had a few jobs like that left over, though.” Milia seemed to understand what I’d intended.

“I think this quest will suit them.”

“You’re probably right,” Milia replied, beaming.

““Good morning, boss!!””

Neal and Roger entered and bowed spiritedly.

“Please give us a really great quest today!” Neal said, sitting down as I did the same.

“As a matter of fact, I’ve got one that’s perfect for you guys,” I replied.

“Wh-what is it? I’d even fight a B-rank monster or beast!” Roger’s eyes glittered.

Ever since they’d worked things out, the duo had been doing fantastic work. They’d proven themselves to be useful mid-range adventurers that I could entrust plenty of varied work to.

“This is it.”

When I showed Neal and Roger the quest stub, they cocked their heads to the side dubiously.

“Huh? Y-you mean this...?”

“Boss, don’t you think you should be giving this to someone who’s more of a beginner...”

I very pointedly pushed up my glasses.

“...Are you saying an F-rank gutter-cleaning quest is not to your liking?”

Neal started breaking out into a cold sweat.

“I-it’s not that I don’t like it... You get it, right...?”

“N-no, I’ll happily take it! You can refuse Roland, but you’re on your own, Neal.”

“Hey, now you’re being unfair, throwing me under the carriage.”

“Look, I can’t say that an F-rank quest truly befits you two, seeing as how Roger is now rank C and you, Neal, are rank B.”

““Then why are you...?””

I raised my pointer finger.

“So you don’t forget your original intentions.”

ZWOOSH! A shock ran through the pair.

“Our intentions?”

“So we don’t forget them, you say?”

“Indeed. Fighting and slaying powerful monsters and venturing into dangerous areas to secure precious resources are indeed important tasks. However, you can’t forget the true essence of adventuring.”

““The true essence...?””

“A quest is a client’s dilemma that they entrust us to resolve. Trouble comes in all sizes, but that doesn’t make any one inferior to another, or less important.”

““Th-that’s so cool...””

Solemnly, Neal placed his hand on his chest and closed his eyes. “I remember the feeling of cleaning those gutters and being thanked for my service... I truly *had* forgotten how I felt back then...”

“Me too... When I saw how they looked after rainfall, I felt it was weirdly worth doing. Because of my efforts, the streets were safe from flooding...”

I nodded.

“You’ve been tackling a lot of mid-range quests recently. I thought it was important to remind you of your roots. If the water in the gutters can’t flow, the town will be swamped when it rains.”

“When I was brand-new, I did tons of work like this... Please let me take this quest!” Roger insisted.

“Me too,” appended Neal

“Thank you very much,” I replied as I saw the two off.

“Mr. Roland, you are sooo good with your words. You just have a way of convincing people,” Milia whispered to me from the next counter over as she did her reception work.

“What are you talking about?” I feigned innocence.

“Well, if I tried that with anyone in rank B or C, they’d complain and never agree to it.”

“Motivating adventurers is part of the job. Do that, and they’ll take the quest right away.”

“Hmm...it’s not as easy for me. I think it’s amazing that you can take the low-paying quests most don’t want and give them to the mid-rankers instead of the girls.”

The cheaper work like gutter cleaning was actually more urgent. Iris usually reminded us that such jobs needed to be accepted during the morning meetings.

Once night fell, the pretty girl squad returned, each member carrying a bag stuffed to the brim.

“Master Roland, we picked tons of them!” Eelu exclaimed.

I took the delivery to the guild employees in charge of inspection. There was no issue with the harvest.

The pretty girl squad’s total reward was one hundred and twenty thousand rins.

“I can’t believe we got this much...”

“We should have a nice meal to celebrate...”

“I need to get myself...clothes and gear.”

“Master Roland, what would you say to dining with us?”

At Su’s proposal, her companions nodded unanimously.

“First, we get clothes. We need some for adventuring and some cute outfits to doll ourselves up...,” Eelu muttered.

“Master Roland, I want you to eat with us...,” Lyan pleaded.

Sanz simply nodded her head emphatically.

I couldn’t help but let a strained smile slip over my face. “If you go to a place that’s too fancy, you’ll blow all your hard-earned money, though.”

Shock and disappointment showed on all their faces.

“R-right. Anyway, we’ll come to get you later! Please wait up for us, okay?” Eelu instructed before heading out. Lyan and Sanz joined her, talking with each other as they departed. Su remained, however.

“You’re not going with them?” I questioned.

“Master Roland...thank you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Today’s quest. You gave us a great one today, didn’t you? One that’s better than normal?”

“It was an E-rank quest—nothing out of the ordinary for adventurers of your level.”

“I know, but... Never mind. How rude of me. Thank you.” The elf bowed her head slightly before running after the other members of her party.

While I was cleaning up near closing time, Milia came over to me with a grin on her face. “Looks like they figured it out. They always come in calling you Master Roland and take the lowest-paying quests that no one else will. It’s a big help to us, but it was leaving them with no money to spend. Even if you offered to pay them an allowance, I don’t think they’d take it. So instead, you tricked them into taking a better quest. Am I right?”

“Who knows. Possibly,” I responded.

“Guess I should have expected that. Maybe it was rude of me to ask, but I wanted to know.” Milia chuckled, looking pleased with herself.

My ears caught some small commotion out in front of the office. It seemed the pretty girl squad had finished preparing.

Once the closing meeting was finished, Milia told me to have a good time and ushered me out the back door. I headed around to meet the pretty girl squad.

“I want to sit next to Master Roland,” Lyan whined.

“Then I get to sit to his right,” Su stated.

“Then I want to...sit on his lap,” Sanz muttered.

“Wait right there. I’m the leader, so I decide seating arrangements. First off, I have to sit next to him to pour the alcohol...,” Eelu asserted.

“Nu-uh, that’s unfair—unfair, I tell you!”

“Eelu, you’re abusing your authority.”

Nod, nod.

The four devolved into a noisy back-and-forth, choosing again to settle things with a rock-paper-scissors battle.

“It doesn’t really matter. Let’s hurry and get going.” I started walking to the tavern. I paid for their meals in appreciation of their efforts.

Meeting the Ready-to-Go Rookie

One busy day at the office, a female employee brought over a reception desk stub near closing time.

“Mr. Argan, this is from an aspiring adventurer. Over there.”

“Okay, thank you very much.”

I took the hopeful adventurer’s slip, made sure it was filled out correctly, then looked over at the one who’d submitted it.

They wore a cloak and a hood. Though it was unclear at first glance, I could tell the adventurer hopeful had a woman’s physique. Glossy black hair spilled from her hood.

She seemed to be garnering a lot of attention.

“Miss Candey Mineart,” I called.

“Oh, coming!” the hooded woman answered in a listless tone.

Her eyes were a deep vermilion. Though Rila’s eyes were a vibrant red, hers were more the color of blood.

I headed to the reception desk and asked her various questions for reconfirmation.

“That’s no problem with me.”

“...”

Something about this person was setting my senses off.

This woman, she couldn’t be...

“Why are you trying to become an adventurer?” I inquired.

“Well, that’s obvious. It’s for the money, duh.”

“...I see.”

I placed the mana measurement crystal on the counter.

“This will measure your mana. Please hold your hand over it.”

“Okaaay.”

When Candey did as requested, it shone with a piercing, bright blue light.

“Oh dear? Is that what was supposed to happen?” she asked.

“Yes, it’s fine.”

The guild was astir.

“What was that just now...??”

“It never lights up like that for a mana measurement!”

“She a monster or something...?!”

While the other assembled adventurers were flabbergasted, my coworkers seemed smug for whatever reason.

“They think that’s enough to be impressed? It’s nothing.”

“Hmph, Roland was way more amazing.”

“After seeing Roland in action, I don’t think I’ll ever be surprised by anything ever again. You know what I mean?”

I didn’t really understand why they were acting so snooty.

Glancing down at the reading, I saw it was over ten thousand. The benchmark value was one thousand, which was C rank. At ten thousand, this girl was at S. I guess she was a pretty capable rookie.

When I looked at her, she returned my gaze with a charming smile.

“...”

The expression didn’t mean much to me because I was already onto this young woman. My male coworkers, however, were a different story.

“Oof...”

“Oh no...I can’t stand up right now.”

“Uh-huh, I’ve memorized that face. I look forward to thinking about it tonight.”

“Roland didn’t so much as flinch, even after that super pretty girl smiled in front of him like that.”

It wasn’t just the men among the guild employees who were making a fuss, either. Adventurers were also staring and seemed taken aback.

Candey was wearing a coat that concealed her physique, and her hood only partially revealed her face. Yet even covered up, she still had a captive audience.

The female employees appeared unimpressed. They started whispering among themselves.

“Mr. Argan didn’t even twitch when she looked straight at him.”

“Even a girl like that isn’t enough to make him flinch anymore.”

“So, basically, that means he doesn’t care about her face or her figure?”

“He’s like a saint...! That means he prefers a woman for her personality, right...?”

“““““So maybe I’ve got a shot...then...?”””””

I felt a sudden chill.

“Please get back to work!” Milia warned the gossiping ladies.

“Miss Candey, you’ve passed,” I stated.

“Oh dear, oh dear. Oh my, oh my. Did I really? Oh yay.”

“However, I still must request that you take the practical.”

I had to verify it for myself.

“Okaaaay.”

I guided Candey to the outskirts of town. A gaggle of curious adventurers followed us. Once this was over, they would undoubtedly want to play the part of the mentor and ask her out to dinner.

“Miss Candey, anything goes. Please attack at will,” I stated.

“Are you really sure about that?”

“Please don’t hold back. This is an exam, after all.”

Candey nodded, then undid her outer button and pulled her hood off.

As expected, she was beautiful—a match for Rila, even.

“““““Whoaaaa?!”””””

The gathered spectators let fly exclamations of excitement.

“Well then, here I come.”

She turned the palm of her hand to the ground and a bloodred summoning circle formed under her feet.

A pike made an ungodly echoing noise as it was drawn from the center of the array.

“Would you rather I stop now?” Candey checked again.

“I don’t find that particularly intimidating, so please come at me,” I replied.



It seemed that had gotten her riled up, as one would expect. She scowled for a moment.

Now silent, the woman readied her pike and showed off its form to me. The spearhead traced an arc in the dim light, glinting as it caught rays from the moon.

Hmm. Not too bad. Beautiful form, to be certain.

Her motions almost seemed performative, but when I analyzed each gesture individually, I could tell she'd make one heck of an impression in a battle.

"I can't be held accountable if you die, you know?"

"Without any insight into your opponent's abilities, I sincerely doubt you'll be able to defeat them."

"...Tsk."

It seemed I'd hit a nerve again.

As I'd expected, Candey was a proud sort, despite it not showing much in her attitude. More and more, it looked like Candey was what I believed her to be.

Arrogance was a common trait of her kind.

Hsh.

She thrust with her spear. It was a very simple attack, but it concealed a hidden tactic. The gesture was enough for me to discern what skill was being used with the strike.

In the darkness, the tip of her weapon lanced through the air. Then it elongated, coming at me like a snake. However, I could see it in the night. The attack wouldn't reach me.

I invoked my skill.

After Candey had attacked and left herself wide open, I slipped around behind her.

"That was an excellent thrust—had all your weight behind it, too. Very sharp," I said, praising her.

"Huh? What...? You're behind me?!"

Panicked, she tried to attack again by jabbing her pole arm. However, I merely kicked it up.

"Lose your composure and you dull your motions. Give in to anger, and it's the same result."

"A-are all human adventurer test proctors...th-this powerful...?"

After that exchange, it seemed she had realized my true strength. To catch on so quickly meant she really was adept.

"I honestly didn't want to use this, but I guess now that it's come to it..."

The moment our gazes met, her bloodred eyes glinted intensely.

"Dispell."

"Huh?! WHAAAA—?!"

Anticipating what she was trying, I countered it. There was a

sound like breaking glass as I canceled her maneuver.

Candey dropped to the ground, and her pike vanished.

"I guess I'm okay with calling this my loss. I don't think I could match up to you anyway... And I used the ace up my sleeve to make sure I wouldn't have to risk being revealed for what I am, too. I can't believe you used Dispell...ugh, I'm so done..." The woman sighed, despondent.

I approached and whispered something into her ear. "___"

"...H-how did you figure it out?"

"It's a secret. Anyway, a pass is a pass. I'll treat you like any other adventurer from here on out, so you needn't worry. Now, let's head back to the guild."

I offered her a hand and pulled her to her feet.

"A superior fighter and a gentleman to boot..."

As we returned to the guild, the adventurers who had witnessed the exam tried to invite Candey out to all sorts of places.

"How 'bout tonight?! It'll all be my treat!"

"W-w-would you join me?! I can teach you all sorts of stuff!"

"I know this great place! Let's go later?"

"I have three thousand rins in savings. I will give it all to you. Just marry me. I like you. I love you."

She got everything from straightforward invitations to overbearing confessions of love. Candey brought her hands together as she faced the men and apologetically shook her head.

"I'm so sorry. I'm going to be spending tonight with Master Roland."

With just those few words, the adventurers lost hope. They drifted off like ashes carried away on the wind.

The thing that had tipped me off about this woman was her name. Candey Mineart was an alias. Her real name was Candice Minelad. She was a member of the demon lord's army—a vampire who had annihilated an entire battalion.



I took Candey, the former member of the demon lord's army and now rookie adventurer, home.

"I wonder, where oh where you could be taking me?" she questioned.

"I think you might be in for a shock."

"Oh my. My, my, my, you mean you've got a surprise for me? I am sooo looking forward to it," she teased.

My inkling from earlier must have been a realization that there

was a vampire in my presence.

Standing at the entrance, I confirmed that the lights were on.

"Is this...a restaurant...?"

"No, this is my home."

When we opened the door, Rila ran over in an apron.

"Finally, you're back!" Rila proudly stuck out her chest.

"You're not even going to give me a 'welcome home'?" I asked.

"I made dinner and waited for you. Or would you rather bathe first? Or...perhaps bathe together...?" Rila began fidgeting.

Since taking a bath together always turned into a battle of wills, I turned that suggestion down. "None of the above. Rila, we have a guest."

Candey, the adventurer and Rila's former underling, was watching us with her mouth agape.

"Demon Lord, Your Greatness...?"

"Hmm? ...You? Is that you, Dey?"

"Oh my, it really is you."

"I'd know that lackadaisical way of speaking anywhere."

The two of them shared a light embrace.

"I am impressed you survived," remarked Rila.

"Demon Lord, Your Greatness...the public has claimed the hero slew you... Are you real? No...your voice, your beauty, you even used my nickname. This can only be the demon lord I once knew."

Candey the adventurer tilted her head, seeming slightly puzzled.

"But I can't sense any of your mana... Did something happen...?"

"Mm-hmm. A lot's happened. Officially, I have perished. However, that is not the actual case."

It seemed Candey understood. She clapped her hands together. "So that's how it is, then."

I'd brought this vampire here because Rila had mentioned to me that she wanted to return all her former subordinates still on the continent to Hell. If any of them were interfering with the normal lives of others, she'd declared she would end them herself.

We headed to the dining room where Rila had set out dinner, and each of us took our seats.

"Knave, I am impressed you realized that Dey was one of mine."

"She had too many tells. Her mana was beyond anything an amateur could possess, that evil eye, her prowess with her spear, and most of all, her presence reminded me of other vampires I'd encountered during the war."

"I see."

After that, I recounted to Rila how Candey had become an adventurer.

Candey, also known as Dey, seemed curious as I told her the

details of what had happened with Rila.

"I see. So you actually defeated her, Master Roland. And you used a magical item—that collar—to hold back her mana. I would never have expected to reunite like this, not even in my wildest dreams. I'm just glad we both survived."

Rila nodded in agreement. "Dey, I do not like roundabout chatter. I shall get to the point. Do you plan to return to Hell?"

"To Hell...?"

"You became an adventurer for lack of money, right? Roje occasionally stops by. Next time she does, she could accompany you back to Hell."

When the time had come to retreat at the end of the Human-Fiend War, Dey was being pursued and had lost her unit. Since then, she'd been wandering aimlessly.

"You do not need to force yourself to hide that you are a vampire. The coat and hood are unnecessary. Concealing yourself must be difficult, is it not?"

Dey placed a hand on her cheek and thought for a while. "No, my Demon Lord, I don't think I've been forcing myself to do anything. Living here has been enjoyable in its own sort of way."

Rila sighed slightly before saying, "I suppose your evil eye lets you have your way with men as much as you please, after all."

"I did use it after our defeat, but only on those who tried to attack me."

A vampire's evil eye could produce a kind of Glamour spell. It was a type of suggestion that prevented the target from disobeying the commands of the caster. It only worked on the opposite sex, but the Glamour was more potent than most because of that.

"You did try to use it during the exam, though," I stated.

"Oh my, but that was only because you were such a formidable opponent, Master Roland."

"Hmph, it would not work. Do not use the evil eye on this man."

When her superior pouted, Dey let out a chuckle. "My Demon Lord, when did you learn about love and turn into a maiden?"

Rila flushed. "...It's not as though I have...but you are a formidable rival... Of those among the army, you were the only one who matched me in looks..."

"Oh my." Dey grinned.

"In the past, you were so noble and unapproachable, my Demon Lord, but now you are a beautiful young woman. You've tasted passion and love. Quite a transformation."

"D-d-d-do not call what we have something as frivolous as *love* or *passion*," Rila stammered bashfully.

Dey seemed to be enjoying herself, laughing at Rila's reactions.

“We have gone off topic. Dey, are you planning to be an adventurer?” Rila asked.

“Yes. So long as I’m not disturbing you or Master Roland...”

“I have no qualms with it. Returning to Hell would not necessarily bring you happiness, after all.”

“I don’t have any issues with it, either,” I added.

The Adventurers Guild accepted all kinds. Then again, I *had* turned away the hero-cum-princess for personal reasons.

“Looks like I’m going to be in your care from here on out, Master Roland.”

“And I’ll be counting on you. I’m sure you don’t have money for lodgings, so you can stay here tonight.” Dey then looked at Rila to make sure it was all right with her.

“One of my subordinates is in distress. I cannot be stingy. You may stay.”

“Thank you.”

“However, um...it will cause us problems if your visit proves overlong...” Rila tapped the tips of her fingers together.

“Oh right. I’m so sorry for disrupting things when you’re living under the same roof as Master Roland.”

“S-s-s-stop that...”

“Oh my, your face is so red... How darling.”

“Grrr...! I—I cannot believe you have me twisted around your finger...”

The balance of power had shifted, and now Rila was being teased by her former subordinate.

“Tis time to show my true capabilities as the demon lord. Y-you... may s-stay here...as long as you desire.” Although the gesture was incredibly generous, she seemed conflicted about the decision. “I shall go to the bath. You may make yourself at home.”

...She ran off.

Dey helped me clean up after the meal.

“I don’t know much about vampires, but don’t you have an urge to drink blood? Are you going to be okay?”

“Oh my, Master Roland, have I piqued your interest?”

“It’s something I’m unfamiliar with, so it’s more of an intellectual curiosity.”

“Hmm? This may surprise you, but the act is actually quite intense in a number of ways. I’m consumed by a tormenting, frightening hunger, and because of that, my reaction when I drink blood is acute. I can’t be certain of it myself, but those I drink from have claimed the sensation to be similar to sex.”

Once the dishes were done, we lounged on the living room sofa. I rolled up my right sleeve and offered my arm to Dey.

“Want to give it a try?”

“Whaa—?”

It seemed I’d genuinely surprised her.

“I don’t really have a desire to, but...I supposed a little wouldn’t hurt...”

“It’s just for the experience,” I explained.

“The demon lord will be furious.”

Despite the remark, Dey looked positively ecstatic, swallowing heavily.

“She takes a long time in the bath,” I said.

That had cinched it. Dey clamped on to my arm. When her fangs dug in, they prickled and made the area sting slightly.

Slurp, slurp. Dey drank away.

It actually did feel kind of good. The pleasure hit me as if I were being pummeled by it in the back of my head. The numbing pleasantness of it made my vision flicker. To compare it to something, it felt most like ejaculation.

However, when I shook my head vigorously, the sensation disappeared.

Dey’s eyes looked intoxicated. “Master Roland, I’m sorry... It’s been so long, I...”

A scowl twisted her expression. Though she looked troubled, she let out a pleasant sigh. She licked her wet lips with her tongue, then placed her lips on mine. Dey truly was sinking her teeth into me, so to speak.

I opened my mouth, and her tongue slithered in. Unable to stand it any longer, Dey pulled off her clothes and started to tug at mine.

“If we make any noise...the demon lord will chase me out...”

Evidently, sex was incredibly intense after she drank blood, and she climaxed several times.

“I was so curious to know what kind of man the demon lord could have genuinely fallen in love with...,” Dey said, panting and dripping with sweat as she lay on my chest.

The three of us ended up living together for a little while.



“I would like to become independent as soon as I can. A high-paying quest would be nice, please,” Dey solicited at breakfast.

I thought she wouldn’t be a morning person considering she was a vampire, but that didn’t seem to be the case. A life in the army had acquainted her with waking early and sleeping at night.

“She could be called a night owl, but for the day,” Rila remarked.

“I’m not so great at handling sunlight, but using Fight Guard makes it easier. But I would prefer not to be out in the sun, if possible,” appended Dey.

Fight Guard was a type of defensive magic that dampened the effects of flame magic. Apparently, it blocked out the heat of the sun’s rays, too.

“Returning to the point, you’ll start in rank F as a rookie. And the reward will be in line with the quest,” I said.

“Is that so...?” Dey replied, a little sullen.

“I explained it yesterday, didn’t I?”

“To think that Dey, one of the most prominent members of the demon lord’s army and known for her beauty and her capabilities, would be an F-rank adventurer.” Rila’s shoulders heaved with gleeful laughter.

The time came for me to depart, and I left the two women at home.

“You work hard today!” Rila put her hands on her hips and thrust out her chest as she saw me off. Behind her, Dey politely waved goodbye.

“Mm-hmm. I’m headed out,” I told them, then began the walk to work.

Before the morning meeting, all the male employees interrogated me about Dey. I evaded them nonchalantly.

Iris’s remarks today were brief, so we opened for business pretty quickly. When I got to my seat, she brought me some documents.

“Here. It’s a letter. Take it, okay?” she stated curtly, then left for her office.

“What should we do about these quests?”

I stowed the envelope Iris had given me and looked over several sheets of paper Milia held out. She had collected some quest stubs. They were all for jobs from a long time ago, too—the dregs. The contents were varied—slayings, collection, guarding, security, errands. However, they all shared something in common: irksome details. When a quest objective was clear and straightforward, adventurers snapped them up readily. Should a job seem more complex or tedious, they typically passed the work over.

The issue was whether the rewards fit the quests.

As a guild worker, my job was to set adventurers up with jobs, but because adventurer preference was taken into account, unpopular quests cropped up occasionally.

Milia showed me the documents.

“What have we done in past instances where no one accepted a quest?” I asked.

“Once the time period lapses and we don’t have any takers, we’ll explain that to the clients. Depending on the circumstances, we’ll adjust the reward or the rank...but if we can’t do that or if it doesn’t work, we end up terminating the quest. Since the clients really do need the help, I’d like to resolve these jobs, if we can.”

Riffling through the submissions, I realized that several of the jobs had something in common.

“Harvesting a noctilucent butterfly...with a reward of twenty thousand rins. Guarding the storehouses at night for three days...reward of thirty thousand rins. Extra for a brothel...one night, women only, requires interview, thirty thousand rins, I see...”

All of these were for work that had to be done after dark.

“Noctilucent butterflies are tough to identify, and although this quest involves trekking through the woods and mountains at night, the reward is small,” Milia remarked.

It certainly was.

“Taking this storehouse one means being stuck there for three days, and guard duty after dark can get dangerous. When you consider all that, the remuneration isn’t much,” she continued.

“When the quest doesn’t suit their preferences, adventurers won’t take them,” I said.

As for the one about the brothel, it was unclear why anyone would bother submitting such a thing to the Adventures Guild at all, or why an employee had approved it. An exceptional mystery, indeed.

Folks in the hall began chattering excitedly, and I looked up to find Dey approaching.

“Hello.” She grinned and gracefully waved her hand. All the men in the room went to their knees.

“She’s pretty and kinda sexy to boot...”

“She’s so erotic...”

“I want to put my head on her lap...”

With one gesture, she’d knocked them all out, other than me, that is.

“Hmm? Perfect timing,” I commented. After thinking about why most people thought these troublesome quests were too low-paying, I realized it was because they were all dangerous in some way and required working during the night.

“Master Roland, I’ve come to get a quest.”

When Dey spotted me, she waved again, which made Milia warble and tremble.

“Huh? He’s friends with that beautiful, lewd-looking woman...?! Has Roland added a new member to his harem...?!” someone exclaimed.

Dey sat down across from me.

“Hey, just to confirm, how would you feel about working at night?” I inquired.

“That’s when I’m supposed to be active, actually. Right now, I’m doing what you humans would call ‘keeping late hours.’”

“Perfect. I have some jobs that are right up your alley.”

I introduced Dey to the quests Milia and I had been discussing.

“I guess I could do quests like these. But, Master Roland?”

“What is it?”

“The noctilucent butterfly one is a rank D, and so is the night guarding. And this brothel quest is a rank C...”

Dey was a complete rookie, and it was her first day, no less. Still, I knew exactly how powerful she was.

“Yes, having adventurers take quests based on their rank is the by-the-books approach. However, if a staff member believes individuals are capable enough, they can let that adventurer tackle something more challenging. You were one of the preeminent members of the demon lord’s army, and you specialize in working at night,” I explained.

Dey’s whole face lit up. For a moment, her grin seemed bewitching.

Clients probably wouldn’t want an F-rank adventurer on the case, so I’d likely need to tag along and explain the situation to them.

“If you finish those two today, then handle the night guarding afterward, you’ll come out of it with eighty thousand rins.”

“Yay! In that case, sign me up!”

“Okay, I’ll process the papers.”

We had gotten rid of three stagnant quests at once, and Dey would be able to work during hours that were comfortable for her. On top of that, the clients would save money on the quests, and the guild would still get the commission. Everything had resolved quite well.

Dey was strong enough I didn’t have to fret. Just that was a huge weight off my shoulders.

I left the counter to Milia and tagged along with Dey.

We chose to leave the gathering quest for later and first figure out the brothel one and storage night-guarding quests. We headed to both the clients.

“Does this town really have a brothel?” asked Dey.

“It’s in the next town over,” I replied.

We mounted a horse, with Dey sitting behind me, and rode off.

“Does this mean you think I’m powerful, Master Roland? Even though I didn’t accomplish anything in the practical exam the other day?”

“You caused quite an impact when you annihilated an entire

battalion overnight. And single-handedly, at that. You would've been a fright and difficult to deal with if you were an enemy."

"Ha-ha, I could say the same of you." Dey squeezed me.

While I enjoyed the sensation of her chest pressing against my back, we arrived at the neighboring town. It was a small settlement with three brothels.

I knocked on the back door of one of them. A middle-aged woman I'd seen several times before appeared.

"Oh, why isn't it Roland from the guild."

"Hello. I've brought you an adventurer for the quest you submitted earlier."

"Oh? This girl there?"

Her gaze was fixed on Dey as though the vampire were the only thing in the world.

"Yes. It's a C-rank quest, but she's still in rank F...and it said that there would be an interview."

"It's fine. Who cares about her rank? Also, with that face, we haven't got any problems! Your choices are always right, Roland." The woman turned to Dey. "We'll be expecting you this evening."

"Yes, thank you," Dey replied with a slight bow.

"Roland is always willing to listen when I need help. He's been a real blessing," the old woman said with a laugh.

After all the details had been straightened out, Dey and I mounted our horse again.

"It seems they really trust you here," the vampire said.

"You think so? Everyone's like that. They're all just nice people."

"Only because of what you've done and the sense of safety you bring."

From her spot behind me, Dey chuckled to herself.

Next, we needed to go to the storage client. They also had no problems with Dey because I was the one recommending her.

"You used to tutor the hero, didn't you, Roland? If you say she can handle it, then there can be no doubt. I don't mind that she's in rank F in the slightest," the man in charge of the request said.

"I need to do this right, so I don't hurt your reputation, Master Roland...", Dey stated.

"Don't worry about it. It'll take some getting used to, no matter what. Just make sure you take the work seriously."

Since the noctilucous butterfly quest could be done at any time, I took Dey back to the house for the moment.

No sooner had I arrived than I heard a voice from within the house.

“Lord Rileylaaa! Please take a look at this! I caught it in Hell and brought it for you!”

“Oh-ho, what a rarity.”

“This butterfly apparently glows at night and is rarely seen in the human realm.”

“Hmm? Are you gifting this to me?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I, Roje Sandsong, caught it especially for you, Lord Rileyla. Once the sun sets, it shall glow faintly like a mirage. I hope you will enjoy it...”

“Er, well...I—I do not really care for insects...”

Entering, I found Roje trying to force a bug on Rila, who received the gift with a troubled look on her face.

That's definitely a noctilucent butterfly.

“Ah! You bastard! How dare you leave Lord Rileyla to go to work! Have you ever considered Lord Rileyla's feelings? Stuck here all on her own as she waits for you to come home—”

I ignored Roje's lecture and instead asked Rila, “Did she give that to you?”

“Mm-hmm... But I am not sure what to do with it...”

“Would you mind if I took it?”

“Not at all!”

Eagerly, Rila handed the noctilucent butterfly over to me. With that, one of the quests was done.

“But...” On her hands and knees, Roje started to sob. Dey gently rubbed her back.

I took the noctilucent butterfly back to the guild and finished reporting it in. I was planning on giving some of the reward to Roje.

“Mr. Roland, where in the world did you find that noctilucent butterfly?” Milia inquired.

“Evidently, they're not that hard to find in Hell.”

“Uh-huh...in heh-ell... I had no idea a bug-catching spot like that existed,” replied Milia, eyes full of admiration.

The next day, Dey finished the brothel quest, and a few nights later, she also completed the night-guarding one.

“Huh? All the stagnant quests are done? And all at once?” one of my coworkers questioned.

“Roland said he got them all figured out.”

“Seriously? I guess we'd never hear the end of it had we let those jobs just sit and rot. Thank goodness for the Lahti branch ace.”



Dey didn't end up staying with Rila and me for very long, only three days.

She had easily accomplished the difficult night quests no one else had wanted that I'd arranged for her. Immediately, she was elevated to rank E and would doubtlessly continue to climb the ranks.

Dey informed me that she had gotten enough money to start living at an inn.

"I do not mind...but are you sure you should go?" Rila asked.

"Yes, I can't impose on you any more than I have, Demon Lord."

"I am no longer the demon lord. You may call me Rileyla from now on."

"As you wish."

"Should you have any trouble, you know where to find me. You can come to me about anything."

"Thank you. I'm truly grateful."

When she left, Dey bowed to us lightly.

"I'm sure we'll see each other at the guild occasionally. Keep up the good work," I told her.

"Okaaaay."

And just like that, Dey moved out.

Because she preferred to operate after dark, she often showed up at the office near the end of business hours.

"If I had stayed much longer, I would have ended up wanting to eat you, in many different ways...and I doubt that Lord Rileyla would have approved," Dey admitted when I introduced her to some quests.

"So this is in consideration for your superior, then?" I questioned.

"I doubt I'll ever meet anyone like her in my lifetime, after all."

Like the last time, I fixed Dey up with quests no one else wanted to take.

Recently, I found myself wondering what she ate. Previously, she'd told me, *"Human food satiates my physical hunger, but it doesn't do much to curb my other appetites..."*

Dey explained that vampires would drink blood to satisfy a combination of desires that humans would refer to as lust and hunger. When it went unsated, she felt horribly starved.

I was curious how she handled that in Hell, so I asked Rila.

"She partook of limited amounts of blood from criminals. That was how the demon lord's army functioned. Apparently, that would help curb the cravings. But I have heard human blood is exceptional..."

In which case, to Dey, the human realm was like a heavenly buffet.

"We should probably be somewhat cautious of Dey, then," I stated.

"That is not necessary. She is not so ill-tempered, knave," Rila responded, looking straight at me.

She trusted Dey quite a bit, but I wasn't so easily convinced.

I suppose the ghastly scene of the battalion she had annihilated might have factored into that. I still couldn't remove the image from the back of my mind—the image of the beautiful woman, fangs out, drooling saliva that stimulated blood flow, and supping.

Even those who had fallen to her pike had been drained. Now that I thought about it, her spear was likely cursed to extract the blood from those it skewered.

From then on, Dey would appear at the guild once every three days to report on her quests before leaving again. When I asked if anything was troubling her or if there were any new developments, she told me there was nothing to report.

It didn't seem like she was lying, and over time I began to trust her more. Right when I was finally feeling convinced, Iris handed me another letter.

"Here."

"...Thanks."

I read over its contents, then went to visit Dey at her inn after work.

"Oh, that pretty lady? She hasn't been staying with us recently."

"...I see. Thank you."

Where could she be?

"I guess I'll go down the possibilities starting with the least desirable ones."

My only detour was a quick trip to the stables to borrow a guild horse.

A nobleman's house was on a nearby mountainside. While it belonged to a lord who held dominion over some portion of the land, his son had been using it recently.

That first letter Iris had given me had been from Lord Bardel. Upon receiving it, I'd asked Neal and Roger to do some digging. Both came back with reports of the same odd rumor going around. The arrival of this second message from Lord Bardel confirmed what I'd been suspecting. Perhaps my concerns hadn't been misplaced after all.

Are you aware that I have lost contact with several of the adventurers I

know in the last month? Lord Bardel had inquired in the first missive.

I had, of course, told him I had no idea what could have been happening.

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for adventurers to go missing, I'd replied.

It seems that it is not only adventurers that are disappearing. Some of my fief subjects have as well. I have had my people look into it, but we are utterly confounded.

His subjects were growing restless.

They no longer felt safe going outside, so Lord Bardel had appealed to me. This must have been rather dire if he was going out of his way to contact me.



I rode for a long while and finally caught sight of a stately mansion on the small mountainside. Light shone through its windows.

After tying my horse to a random tree, the moon appeared from behind a curtain of clouds.

Something moved in the middle of the empty field. Though the figure was small, I spotted the coat and hood that were her usual attire. She was making for the manor.

“You know, I was really hoping I’d be wrong.”

The moon disappeared behind the clouds again just as I used my Unobtrusive skill to fade into the dark.

I presumed the figure was Dey and tailed her up to the mountain abode. The plot of land was large enough to fit a small village. Although a guard was standing at attention, it wasn’t difficult to break in.

There was nothing wrong with Dey living here, but she could have told me.

“...I guess I don’t know for sure that she even does...,” I mumbled as I slipped into the mansion undetected.

I detected the presence of humans working within the building, but I couldn’t tell if they were maids or cooks. Dey continued through the manor, unknowingly leading me to wherever she was headed.

We went up the stairs to the fourth floor. I watched her enter the backmost room, then held my breath as I listened.

"I'm back," Dey said.

"No quests today? Then we can take our time enjoying ourselves tonight."

"..."

I could tell from the conversation between Dey and this man, who seemed to be an aristocrat, that they were well acquainted. Perhaps Dey had met him during one of her jobs, and he'd taken to assisting her in various ways.

Truthfully, I even *wished* that was the case.

However, Lord Bardel, Neal, and Roger had all reported stories of adventurer disappearances in the last month.

Most adventurers didn't have a set address, and folks didn't bat an eye when one or two went missing. That was just the way it was. Some people didn't see them as much better than robbers.

If Dey and the aristocrat were involved in the disappearances, they had chosen the right victims. Still, I didn't have proof yet.

I decided to observe for a little longer. When I heard footsteps, I hid in a shadow.

Dey, having removed her coat, was leaving the room with the young noble.

I recognized him as Victor Dalton. I'd seen his face during the Human-Fiend War. I was sure he was the third son of a count who ruled a territory to the north. The pair enjoyed a quiet conversation with each other as they sauntered down the hall and went downstairs.

Once they got to the basement, Dalton opened a lock. Internally, I sighed. Whatever awaited within was important enough that he had to keep it sealed. It was proof he was doing *something* nefarious.

Dey followed Dalton as though she had done this before.

I continued after them, silently traipsing down the chilly passage that seemed to have been carved straight from the rock. According to floor plans I'd studied earlier, this passage led from the largest building, where Dey had met Dalton, to a shack.

The smell of blood was in the air. When they opened the door to the room they were headed to, that scent became even more pungent.

I could feel the presence of others as well.

"Ughhh! Ngh! Nnn?"

"Now, help yourself. But only take a little, all right?"

"Okay."

"...Ah! Uh?!"

I could hear the bloodcurdling sound of slurped liquid. There was another chamber ahead, so I broke open the lock and went inside.

"....."

A rotten odor assaulted me.

Several tiny black dots—flies—flitted about.

Along the walls were all kinds of devices covered in dark crimson stains.

The same held true for the floors.

“So it’s not just two or three people, then.”

One look, and it was obvious this wasn’t a pleasant place.

I looked around the chamber until I found a cloth-covered cart. I pulled off the cover and found a pile of corpses. Every single one of them had been mutilated. I counted as many as ten, though the gruesome state of the bodies left it difficult to say for certain.

“...”

Hmm, I see.

Near the cart was another passage with stairs leading up. That was where the shed would be. Perhaps they kept their living stock there.

I might still be able to save them, at least—

“Oh my, Master Roland. What a surprise meeting you here.”

When I turned around, I found Dey standing at the entrance from which I’d come. Her hand was on her cheek, and she cocked her head to the side as she typically did.

Her slender lips formed a weak smile.

“I was surprised, too. What are you doing in a place like this?” I demanded.

“What a pity. Now I’ve got to kill you, Master Roland.”

“I see. That’s too bad.”

I’d barely gotten the words out before Dey started moving. She launched herself off the ground, somersaulted, and kicked down from above.

An average person wouldn’t have been able to keep up with her startling strength and movements.

“That’s all you’ve got?”

Dey opened her mouth wide as she closed in on me, but I clamped my hand around her neck.

“Gah...?! How’d you stop me?!” she wheezed.

I hurled her down onto the filthy ground as hard as I could.

“Ghnhk?! ”

During the adventurer exam, Dey had learned I was much stronger than her. She wasn’t foolish enough to blindly attack me without a plan.

As Dey twitched, I stepped on her arms and legs to restrain her. Then I crouched down to observe her more closely. At the guild, she’d usually kept her hood pulled down far over her eyes, so I’d never noticed it before, but now I spotted exactly what I’d been looking for.

“Dispell.”

Crack! The sound of breaking glass came from Dey.

Now that I thought about it, Dey’s recent conversations with me at

work had felt a bit off compared to earlier. She'd suddenly taken to things like answering a question with another inquiry or talking about something else when I asked her something.

Staring into her eyes had removed all doubt. Dey had been ensorcelled by a hypnosis spell similar to Real Nightmare.

Even vampires weren't immune to such things. They could be paralyzed or forced unconscious under the right circumstances.

"I hurt... Why...?" she muttered, now awake. It seemed she was herself again.

"That's because I threw you down onto the floor," I explained.

"...? Oh my, Master Roland. Where are we...?"

"You don't remember?"

I lent the woman a shoulder and took her from the ghastly room.

"Where in the world...is this...?" she asked.

"Someone was controlling you with magic," I explained.

"Oh my, truly?" she replied lackadaisically. Proof she was back to her old self.

"Does that mean that you came to save me?"

"Not quite. It was very nearly the opposite."

"?"

Thankfully, I had managed to rescue her.

I was glad that things hadn't turned out the way I'd expected.

As we were leaving the basement, I looked into the meal room.

A young man was gagged and blindfolded, but he was alive. I undid his restraints and freed him. He was from a nearby village.

The culprit's initial targets had been adventurers, but somewhere along the way, they had grown indiscriminate.

Once we were out of the cellar, I headed to the shed from aboveground. On the way, I recounted everything to Dey.

"...But...I would never..."

She seemed heartbroken.

I asked Dey how far back she remembered, and she told me the name of a quest from a month ago.

The shed was locked, but I broke the latch, and we headed inside. Ten men and women, some young, others old, were tied up.

"From what you told me, these people were meant to be my food..." Dey questioned.

"No...I don't think that's the reality of the situation."

"Huh? What do you—?"

"Let's hear it straight from the horse's mouth."

Someone was approaching. When I turned around, I found nearly a dozen knights who seemed to be guards accompanying Dalton.

"Now, what in the world are you doing there?"

“I’m freeing the captives.”

Dalton, who wore a smile like one would a mask, did not so much as twitch an eyebrow.

“Tell me your name. I have no idea who you are or where you’ve come from, but you can’t just go wandering onto another’s property.”

The man was adept in magical matters and even led a unit of mages.

“I am a guild employee, Roland Argan. I often arrange quests for Candey. There seemed to be something off about her, so I followed her here. Think of me as an inspector sent by Lord Bardel. He’s grown quite concerned over the missing people, you see.” I pointed at the captives behind me.

Dalton clapped his hands together. “Oh, yes, about that. I gathered them because Candey asked me to. I had no idea what she was going to do with them, but I couldn’t refuse her.”

“Huh...” Dey scowled, looking doubtful.

With no memories of what had occurred, I supposed that was natural.

“Don’t bother with lying,” I replied. “I’ve already seen the room in the basement. You did all of it—everything—to camouflage your hobbies, didn’t you?”

“...”

“It would be better if you restrained yourself from sadistic pastimes. You’ll besmirch your family name.”

A crack finally formed in his mask.

“Did you torture them? What information were you trying to drag out of adventurers and townsfolk?”

Dalton sought no confessions, of course.

The purpose was the torture.

Dey couldn’t have done all this, even if she had gone berserk. The way she killed and butchered looked far different.

Dalton had been planning to use Dey as a scapegoat when he was inevitably discovered. After all, who’d believe the testimony of a vampire? Men couldn’t resist her when she used her evil eye, and she was a creature who preyed on human blood.

A poor, helpless nobleman had been duped by a sinister creature of the night. It was a good alibi.

Until I’d seen things in person, I’d even bought it. I’d thought Dey had been conspiring with the nobleman to kidnap humans and drink their blood—that, or she might have used her evil eye to manipulate him into getting her human meals. I’d thought that the situation had

been one or the other, but when I'd seen things for myself, I'd realized I was wrong.

"A vampire can indeed use a very strong Glamour. Especially on the opposite sex," I stated.

"What are you rambling about? She wanted blood, and I was powerless to say no," Dalton spat back.

"Vampires drink blood out of a deep craving that's beyond human understanding. The hunger is so overwhelming that it could even supersede hypnosis magic."

Dalton clucked his tongue loudly.

I'd led him into the trap.

It seemed he'd been having her suck blood to prevent his spell from losing out to her cravings.

"Umm, so what's going on here?" Dey inquired.

"To put it simply, he was using you because you're a vampire. You were his cover for the torture and murder he engages in for fun."

"Oh my, oh dear, I really can't stomach that. He made me drink the blood of men I've never even met or seen before?" A quiet, chilling anger seemed to emanate from her core.

"Hey, guards. If you want to run, now's the time," I said.

Despite staring down a vampire, the knights only smiled wanly. I suppose they either didn't believe me or didn't think Dey was an actual vampire.

I tried to warn them.

"I don't suck blood without honor. Excepting Master Roland, humans are an inferior species, you know? So, if I do drink, it has to be someone I've deemed worthy, someone I like, someone I've found an interest in."

Dey pressed her palm to the ground.

"The craving really is quite intense. But after I've had enough to sate it, I get in the mood to fool around. In which case, I might as well do that with a human I already want to do that with, right? Vampires choose for themselves."

Dalton finally quit keeping up appearances. "Who's the inferior species?! You're just some leftover from the losing side of the war! Don't act all high and mighty!"

A bloodred pike emerged from beneath Dey's palm, ushered in by a disquieting noise. The woman brandished it lightly, and the guards paled.

However, it was far too late.

"I do love human blood. But it becomes part of our own body, and we vampires are proud beings. I wonder if you understand the difference between food and a proper meal."

Dey leaped forward. Before Dalton or his entourage had any time

to react, the spearhead of her weapon was already piercing through a knight's armor. He didn't even have the chance to scream.

"I'd appreciate it if you could stop treating vampires like common beasts."

Lines like blood vessels appeared on the pike. They writhed as the man Dey had skewered shriveled up.

"This is a bloodsucking spear. It is the weapon of the creature you so terribly misjudge. Taste it. And let it taste you."

In a few blinks of an eye, four of the knights were reduced to shriveled husks. None was a match for Dey.

"AAHHHHHH?!"

"Oh shush..."

Fwoom! She swung the pike, and another guard went tumbling back. When I looked at his face, he was as withered as a dead tree.

"Damn it! You need to recognize who's in control here!" Dalton cried before beginning a chant I didn't recognize.

"More hypnosis magic?" I wondered.

"Uh?!"

For all his bluster, Dalton hadn't been paying attention to me. While he'd been busy trying to subdue Dey, I hurled my right fist into his face.

"Ghnhk?!" He screamed like a crushed frog and was blown away, slamming against the wall of the shed. Upon close inspection, I saw his face was now a bloody mess. It looked like he'd lost some teeth and sported a broken nose, too.

"Lord Dalton, do you recall during the war when an entire battalion was annihilated overnight?" I asked.

"Wh-what has that got to do with this?" he demanded, indignant.

"Candey the adventurer's real name is Candice Minelad. She's the one who did that."

"No...that's..."

While Dalton and I were chatting, those knights of his that were still alive took the opportunity to flee.

"They should have done so earlier. And after you were kind enough to tell them to run, Master Roland. What fools."

Dalton lifted himself up and thrust a finger at me. "You know what it means to oppose me, don't you? The House of Dalton is forever your enemy! Do you understand, you guild worm?!"

"Yes. That's why I'm considering reporting this whole incident to the king."

His earlier authority vanished immediately.

"To...H-His Majesty...? Th-there's no way His Majesty would listen to you..."

Dey made her way over to me. Although smiling, her eyes were

ice cold.

"I might have looked the other way if this were only about me... but you made a mockery of Master Roland and the work he devotes himself to..."

"I'm used to it. Don't worry about it," I commented.

"Well, you are more forgiving than I am. And you defeated me... I like you," Dey admitted.

"Huh? What?! H-he did...?! You mean he's more powerful than a vampire...?! U-unbelievable..."

Dey approached Dalton and kicked him, then thrust her spear before his face.

"Yeek!"

"What do you think we should do with this man?" she asked me.

"S-stop...! Don't kill me..."

Right after he started crying, he began pissing himself.

"I detest pitiful men."

"Stand down, Dey. There's something I'd like to teach him," I stated.

"Wh-what is it?! Whatever it is, I'm willing to learn..." Dalton clung to my feet, desperate for any way out of this.

"I'm glad you're so agreeable, Lord Dalton. I have the perfect room for you. Let's go over there now."

"Huh...what do you mean? What room?!"

Dey broke out into a smile. "Oh my, now that's a good idea. We have all the tools ready and waiting. I'm sure it will be very informative."

"Huh...n-no...stop...tell me, what are you—? No...stop..."

I grabbed his hair and stared into the mess that was his face.

"It's what you know best. However, I'd say that your knowledge is a little one-sided, don't you think?"

The man's already pale face turned an even whiter shade.

I grabbed Dalton's collar and began to drag him.

Dey was humming next to me.

"Nooooooooo! Stop, sto— Aaaaaaaaahhhh?!"

Lord Dalton had indiscriminately abducted innocent adventurers and townspeople, then tortured and killed them for his amusement. As if that was not foul enough, he'd tried to pin the blame on Dey.

The man, who had stolen so many people's *normal lives*, was unforgivable.

"The basement! Not there! Nooooooooo! Please! Please! Please, I beg you! Money! I will give you money!"

I didn't listen as I led him down.

While I'd done this several times myself, I couldn't understand

what was fun about it in the slightest.

“Ha-ha-ha, I am sooo looking forward to this.”

Dey let out a dreamy sigh as she beheld the various devices, all stained with oxidized blood.

“Nooo...help...someone...help...”

“I’m sure there were others who begged the same from you. Did you listen to them? You didn’t, did you?”

Snot and piss flowed out of Dalton as he pitifully sobbed.

I grabbed his hair again, we looked into each other’s eyes, and I let him glimpse my pure, murderous intent.

“Don’t expect death to come easy.”



Since Dalton’s punishment wasn’t particularly pleasant, I’ll spare the details.

I couldn’t let him go free after all he’d done, and Dey had been indignant that a lowly human had forced her to drink blood she hadn’t desired. For the time being, we were both satisfied.

Had a healer been around, we would have mended his wounds and done it over and over again. With no such person at hand, though, we did as much as we could.

Using a Gate spell, I jumped to Lord Bardel’s residence.

I was led to a reception room where Dey and I waited for the man. Once he arrived, we explained everything.

“...The noble was the reason for all of it.” I gestured at the thing that had once been Dalton with my chin.

Lord Bardel stroked his beard, seeming pensive. “I now have the details. Thank you for hearing me out when I asked you for a favor.” He stood up and bowed deeply.

“I’m glad you brought it to my attention. I was worried, too. Disappearing adventurers would be a problem for the guild,” I replied.

“You didn’t stop at just finding the culprit; you resolved the issue at its core. My citizens will sleep safely because of you. Mere thanks are not enough.”

Dalton had fought in the Human-Fiend War. Perhaps something had snapped in him during that time.

“Based on what you have told me, Master Roland, it seems that experience might have formed a connection with pleasure for him at some point. He really was up to no good,” Lord Bardel remarked.

There were those who had tortured demons during the conflict. Maybe Dalton had been one of them.

"I'd appreciate it if you would inform the House of Dalton. They should come to grips with the situation once they see the shack and the room below it. If anything happens, I can inform His Majesty, so please let me know if I should," I said.

There was a chance that the Dalton and the Bardel households might end up in a feud over this. It would depend on how the former responded. Since one of their own had been abducting adventurers and civilians to kill them in another household's territory, I doubted that the Daltons would be unreasonable.

It was likely they would even be thankful since the matter had been settled privately without sullyng their family name.

"Thank you so much, Roland! You've proven quite the capable fellow," Lord Bardel praised. He wanted to give me a reward, but I turned him down. Dey brazenly accepted it, however.

"I mean, you should take whatever people will give you, don't you think?"

On the way home, Dey wove her arm through mine.

"You know, I'm surprised someone managed to hypnotize you...", I commented. That was the one thing I was still unsure about.

Dey checked to make sure no one was around before she replied. "I shouldn't really share this with humans, but...vampires are a race of extremes. Very much so. Staying up late wouldn't be enough to diminish a human's abilities, right?"

"I suppose so. Wait, you don't mean..."

"Ha-ha. I do. The sun makes me more susceptible to everything, especially magic."

I thought back to the Human-Fiend War.

Each night, everyone had been terrified the vampires would strike.

Dey told me she and her kin had used Fight Guard to dampen the effects of the sun so they could march during convenient times of day. However, that was *all* they could do beneath the sun. Even protected by magic, they were still not at full strength.

I realized that the human side never suffered any serious losses from vampires during the morning, afternoon, or early evening.

"To put it in demonic terms...our strength drops to that of a tenth rank, weaker than a platoon leader. Being active while the sun is out is very risky for us," Dey concluded.

There were about fifty platoons among the demon race.

If a vampire was weakened to such a state and got caught alone, a reasonable force of humans could deal with them handily.

Dey's kind was a solid offensive force that specialized at working in the night. But on the other hand, I guess that meant they were nobodies when the sun was up.

"I see. I get it now."

"This is the first time I've admitted this to a human."

"Don't worry—I won't go around telling others."

"Thank you," Dey replied with a smile.

"That man might not have known I was a vampire at first. The quest had gone on longer than I anticipated, and morning came..."

Dey seemed to have trouble recounting the event and trailed off.

If someone saw her in the morning, she likely appeared as nothing more than a remarkable beauty. That torture-happy idiot had probably ensorcelled many lovely women so he could have his fun.

Once the hypnosis had been successful, he noticed she was a vampire and concocted a plan. At least, that was what I believed had occurred.

I gave Dey a slap upside the head.

"Ouch."

"This happened because you made light of humans and thought of us as inferior."

"I'm reconsidering my opinion..." Dey mumbled, slumping down slightly.

Stroking her head, I responded, "Don't worry me too much. I think you're priceless, both when it comes to your elevated abilities and your quirks."

"My, my, what a delightful thing for you to say to me... Now I *have* to do my best."

"That's no joke," I said. "From now on, treat all humans like you would me. Never let your guard down."

"I'll remain vigilant, but if they were all like you, I think I'd fall in love with every person I met. My, what would I do then?" Dey giggled to herself for a moment before switching topics. "If you hadn't come, I would have turned into that cretin's scapegoat and would have been forced to suck blood every day. Thank you."

"Dalton met with the wrath of a gourmand," I remarked.

"I guess you could say that, but I was being forced to drink for no good reason other than maintaining hypnosis. As a vampire, the partaking of blood is something even more sacred than sex. Being forced into it by a lesser creature is...disgraceful." Dey pouted indignantly.

Dawn was fast approaching, but Dey and I took our time walking home.

"I believe I understand why Lord Rileyla loves you from the bottom of her heart. I hold you so dear, I almost want to eat you..."

The woman pressed kisses to my forehead, then nibbled my ear playfully.

"You're not going to bite me? I don't mind if you drink a bit," I admitted.

"This is a sign that I'm courting you. You'd think it's a given for a vampire to bite, but stopping short is how we demonstrate when someone is important to us." Dey hugged me. "I, Candice Minelad, truly adore you, Master Roland."

I had no idea how to react, so I stroked her head.

"If you would like to, would you drink my blood?" she requested.

"What significance does that have?" I inquired.

"Offering my own blood is like giving myself to you," Dey explained.

I nodded, and she tore at the back of her hand with her fangs. A small bit of crimson welled up from the wound before running down her hand to her fingertips.

Somehow, it looked beautiful to me. I took it, put my lips to the back of Dey's hand, and tasted a little of her blood.

I didn't feel like anything had changed in me, and the flavor was no different from the sort I was already well acquainted with. There was nothing especially delightful about it. I suppose it was more ceremonial than anything.

"...Master Roland...thank you."

Dey embraced me again, and tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

"From now on, I'm yours."

Then she closed her eyes as though begging for something.

Suddenly, I heard a sound behind us.

"Uh?! Uh?!"

Since Dey didn't seem like she would be letting go of me, I kissed her several times.

"I'm very happy right now... Even if I end up nothing more than dust, I won't regret it," she professed. Her arms snaked around my neck, and she indulged herself in my lips, leaning into me. "Master Roland...I love you..."

Her caress was passionate, and she refused to release me.

"...What do you two think you are doing in front of the house?"

Rumble, rumble.

I turned around at the strange noise and found Rila standing there, her fists trembling.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh my, oh my. Lord Rileyla, peeping is most

unbecoming,” Dey teased.

“How is it peeping when you’re smooching right in front of my door?!” Rila stamped her feet with each word. She was well and truly angry.

“It’s part of the ceremony, Rila. Supposedly,” I explained.

“I don’t care about any ceremony! You were taking so long to get back...and I was waiting...so then I came out here when I heard voices...”

I guess the sight of Dey and me had shaken all sleepiness from her.

“Well, Lord Rileyla, I will be retiring to bed. Would you like to join me?” Dey invited.

“Hmph. Don’t you make light of me. I will be doing the housework. Unlike you, I do not act on a whim.”

“I think that it really doesn’t make a difference whether you do the housework if you’re not any good at it, just saying...,” I mumbled.

“Did you say something?!” Rila snapped.

“N-nothing at all...”

Smiling all the while, Dey fled the scowling demon lord, disappearing into the house.

“Really now,” Rila remarked with a huff.

I tried to explain what had happened, but she stopped me.

“It’s fine. You have come back. Based on how you and Dey were behaving, I assume something happened. You both stink of blood, too.”

“...I’ll spare you the details, but you were right about her. You’re a good judge of people.”

“It took you this long to realize that?” Rila beamed proudly.

“You don’t have to stay up late for me,” I said.

Rila shook her head and glanced down. Her voice barely a whisper, she answered, “I...um...like you...so...”

She glanced at me and, as though recalling what I’d been doing with Dey earlier, frowned. Then a tiny, exasperated smile bloomed on her face.

“...Welcome home.”

“Yeah, glad to be back.”

Rila placed a hand on my shoulder and stood on her tiptoes. I steadied her by wrapping my arms around her waist.

The mountains in the distance were cast in orange from the morning sun.

The long, long night had broken at last.



One day, three people from the guild headquarters stopped by my branch. They seemed to be looking for Iris. Milia took them to the branch manager's office and came back looking puzzled.

"I wonder what happened?"

Though her question was directed at me, I had no clue.

"Clearly something," I replied, and left it at that.

We went about our work until a bright light flashed. Its brilliance rivaled the sun's.

"Miss Milia?"

"Huh?"

Hurriedly, I forced Milia down to the ground, covering her with my body.

BOOOOM!

A large, deafening explosion roared. It swept over us, followed by black smoke.

Other employees screamed in terrified shock.

"Are you okay, Miss Milia?" I asked.

"..."

Her face was bright red as she nodded several times.

When I finally raised my head, I saw that the office was in ruins.

"This is..."

Seventy percent of the reception counter had been blown away, and the entrance was little more than black rubble now.

Small fires burned here and there, but adventurers were dousing them with water magic.

Miraculously, there were no injuries.

"Did something explode...?" Milia squeaked out as she looked around.

"I thought those guys were up to no good."

"That argument they were having was getting way too heated."

A group of agitated adventurers was speaking among themselves.

"You don't discuss whether somebody cheated or not at the freaking guild, you know?"

"You got that right."

It seemed a couple had gotten into a heated quarrel, the woman had used magic, and this was the result.

"It looks like it was a lover's quarrel between adventurers, I guess, Mr. Roland," Milia stated.

Are we sure? I wondered.

"Miss Milia, I think that spat was meant to trick us. An argument like that would draw anyone's eye, after all. Perhaps it was all an act, a way to keep us from noticing their real intentions."

Milia's eyes went wide.

Why had a fully grown adult man and woman come all the way here to have it out? Why had that been necessary? The answer was that it wasn't, of course. Not in the slightest.

The attack hadn't been targeted at any one person, as only the building itself had been damaged. That being the case, the explosion likely would have come from outside. Which meant...

"It was an indiscriminate act of terrorism."

I searched for the party responsible. However, my efforts weren't needed because the man and woman who'd been arguing earlier suddenly came forward.

"“I-I'm soooo sorry!””

"See, Mr. Roland? I told you. It was just a lover's quarrel."

When I turned around, I found Milia looking relieved.

"What? What was that huge racket just now..."

Iris peeked out from the branch manager's office. "Wh-what the hell?!" She was horrified, to say the least.

The couple who had caused the damage lowered their heads and explained what had happened.

Iris sighed, seeming exasperated.

"Well, it's all said and done now. It looks like we'll be closing the Lahti branch for a while."

That seemed like the right call. Repairs would take time, and I doubted we would be able to work as usual.

Iris dismissed all the adventurers and closed the back door. On it, she stuck a notice that read, *We will be closed for a while.*

Milia voiced the question that was on everyone's mind. "Branch Manager, what are we supposed to do now...?"



“You remember those employees that came from headquarters, right? They came to praise us since we’ve been doing so well.”

My coworkers exchanged puzzled looks. They didn’t understand what Iris was leading up to.

“Since we’ve done an excellent job, headquarters has given us a bonus of five hundred thousand rins!”

Iris pulled a roll of banknotes from her pocket.

““““Whoaaa...,”””” muttered many of the gathered employees.

“With this money...,” Iris began

““““With this money...?”””” my coworkers repeated, hanging on our boss’s every word.

“...we’re going on a trip! All of us together!”

““““WHOAAAA!!””””

And that was how the Lahti branch of the Adventurers Guild wound up going on a shared vacation.

Afterword

Hello everyone. I'm Kennoji.

Because so many of you bought the first volume right after it went on sale, we had to order an urgent second printing. It's also the reason I'm publishing this second installment. So how was the story this time?

I wrote the arranged marriage plot with Almelia around July of last year, but I think I can say it fit well as an episode in this novel. I based King Rubens on Teruyuki Kagawa. He matched my mental image of the character perfectly. Whether you haven't read this book yet or you have, try imagining that King Rubens has Teruyuki Kagawa's voice.

It's also my pleasure to announce that this story is getting a manga adaptation! It's currently being serialized on the ComicWalker website (under the *Isekai Comics* category) and a few other places!

Fuh Araki, who also draws *The Principle of a Philosopher by Eternal Fool* "Asley," will be handling it. That manga is excellent, too! I highly recommend taking a look at it!

Since so many people helped me get the second volume published, I'd like to take a moment to thank them.

To my editor, who got stuck with me, I think the manuscript truly benefited from you pointing out spots where descriptions were lacking. I'm looking forward to working with you in the future.

To KWKM, thank you for drawing Roland in this volume and making him look so cool. They really convey his charisma, even more than I'd hoped they would. I eagerly await future collaborations.

Also, a big thank-you to the person in charge of the design binding, the salespeople, the proofreaders, the employees at the actual bookstores, and everyone involved in the manufacturing and sales process.

Finally, I'd like to express my gratitude to all the readers who bought this second installment. It's my sincerest hope that you're all

looking forward to the third volume!

Kennoji

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by Yen On.**

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